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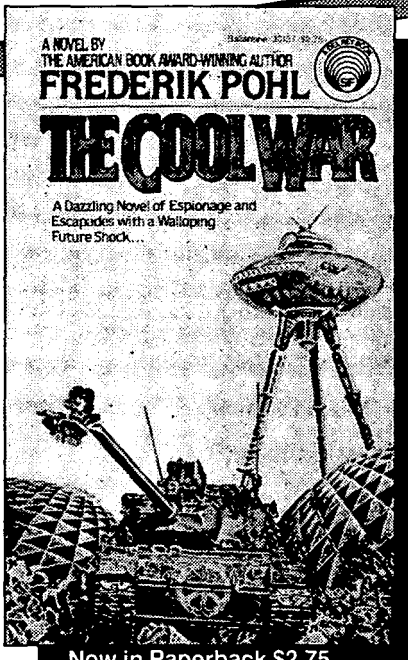
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EDITORIAL: WE'RE DOING WELL

by Isaac Asimov

photo: Roy Schneider

I have always looked upon the science fiction writing fraternity as a family; and, as it happens, I am proud of that family. We are doing well.

There was a time when to be a science fiction writer was to be part of a group that elicited smiles at best and contempt at worst. We had to huddle together against the vast enemy outside; and that was, in my opinion, the cause of the birth of the strong family feeling we now all have. I don't feel bad about that; I think it was worth it. What we gained was ample repayment for what we thought we suffered.

The time of huddling is gone, however. The science fiction writer is no longer looked down upon merely by virtue of his occupation. He is, instead, accorded a measure of respect as a person of imagination and as a futurist. Once his work begins to be acknowledged outside the field, he is considered an authority. What's more, the taint of science fiction does no damage.

Let me give you a personal example. The *New York Times Sunday Magazine* asked me to write an article on my views on "creationism," which I was delighted to do. I wrote the article, and it was published on June 14, 1981. Before its appearance, the *Times* called to ask me what to put in the one-sentence identification of the author that they run with every article.

Then, in a sudden excess of caution, I said, "And listen, perhaps you had better not use the phrase 'science fiction.' I am fighting an active, insidious force that will stick at nothing to further its ends; and I don't want to give them a free stick with which to strike at science. I don't want to give them the chance of writing letters that begin: 'It is significant that a cheap science fiction writer would

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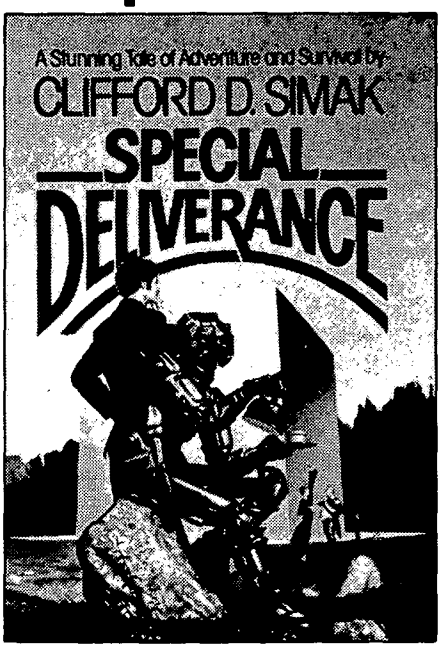

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support evolutionary doctrine which is strictly science fiction to begin with.' "

"Nonsense," said the *Times*. "You are best known as a science fiction writer and that goes in."

So it came about that the identification read: "Isaac Asimov, a professor of biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine, is the author of 232 books, including science fiction, books on literature, history, science, mathematics, and the Bible."

Science fiction, you will note, took pride of place. It didn't bother the *Times*; and, to my astonishment, it was not mentioned in the numerous indignant letters from creationists that reached me after the article appeared. —I had underestimated the respectability of the field.

Nor am I the only science fiction writer in the public eye.

Consider Harlan Ellison, who is, to my way of thinking, the most colorful personality the field has ever produced.

He is a much sought-after lecturer, and his off-the-cuff performances (which I have heard on a number of occasions) are invariably bravura examples of his ability to hold an audience transfixed for several hours at a time. His comments range over a wide variety of subjects. He supports, with the utmost vigor, such causes as feminism, gun-control, pluralism, and so on.

Now I strongly agree with Harlan on all these matters, and on many others. In fact, the only time I ever feel that we are on opposite sides of the fence is when I maintain the importance of science in science fiction. As many of you know, I insist that even when there is no overt science in a science fiction story, the writer *must* have a reasonable understanding of modern science in order that he avoid making scientific errors.

Here, I felt, Harlan might disagree with me, for his stories rarely involve science directly. In fact, he prefers not to have them categorized as science fiction. They are nothing more or less than "Ellison-fiction" for no one else writes exactly as he does.

Imagine, then, my delight when I came across the following passage in Harlan's column in the September 1981 issue of *Future Life*. He said:

"Look: One of the basic tenets of *good* science fiction has always been that it has an intellectual content that sets it apart from and above the usual sprint of merely entertainment diversions. While we'll suspend our disbelief to allow James Bond or Burt Reynolds to jump a car in a way that we know defies gravity and the laws of impact or whiplash, we balk at permitting that kind of mickeymouse stunt in an SF film. Because we know that science fiction deals with

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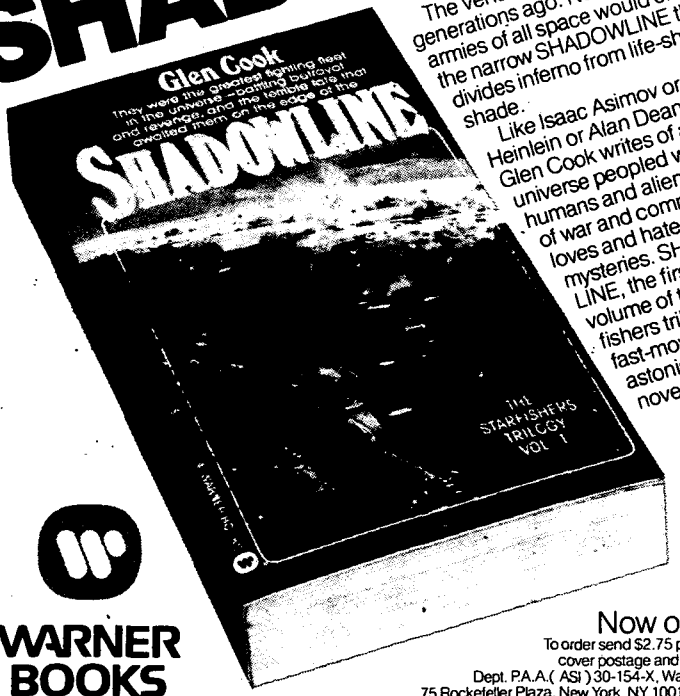
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the laws of the known universe and its accepted physics."

Good for you, Harlan! I'm proud of you.

Or consider Ben Bova, former editor of *Analog* and present executive editor of *Omni*. He was, and still is, a science fiction writer; and, in his role as editor, he has done much to encourage good science fiction writing by others.

But he is doing more. He is becoming one of the outstanding spokesmen in the United States for the advance into space.

I have heard him talk on the subject, and I have read what he has written on the subject. He is calm, he is knowledgeable, he is persuasive. In particular, he has just published a book called *The High Road* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981) which I recommend to all of you. In it, he discusses every facet of the coming space-age technology, and I would like to quote from his introductory page:

"A new space race has begun, and most Americans are not even aware of it.

"The race is not merely between two nations jockeying for political prestige or military power. This new race involves the whole human species in a contest against time. All of the people of Earth are in a desperate race against global disaster. . . .

"To save the Earth we must look beyond it, to interplanetary space. . . .

"This new space-race, in reality, is a crucial struggle against humankind's ancient and remorseless enemies: hunger, poverty, ignorance, and death.

"We must win this race, for one brutally simple reason: survival."

There! That's saying it as it is, in plain, forceful English. And what it makes clear is that all the arguments against going out into space are arguments against survival—neither more nor less.

Good for you, Ben! I'm proud of you.

There are others of the science fiction fraternity who make their voice felt in the outside world, speaking loudly in favor of science, of technological advance, of a viable future, of *human survival*. And they all are listened to with respect.

Included, for instance, are Arthur Clarke, Jerry Pournelle, Larry Niven, Poul Anderson, Fred Pohl. . . . I don't always agree with all their views from a political or economic standpoint, but that's not important. I do agree with their technophile views and that *is* important.

Even Ray Bradbury, who is somehow the epitome of all there is in science fiction that does not involve science and who is much more a poet than a scientist, is a powerful and respected voice in favor of space exploration and use.

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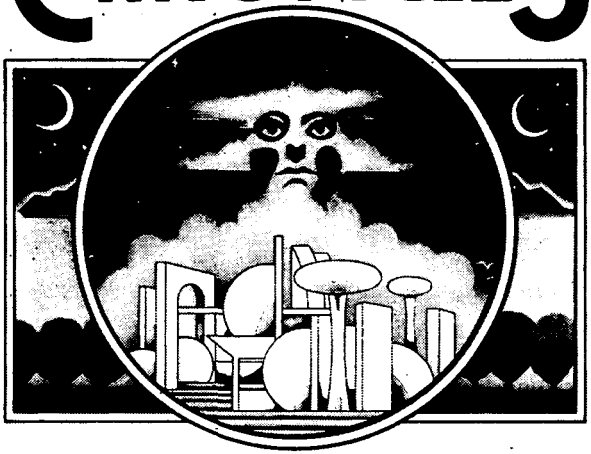

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And no one derides any of us as "mere science fiction writers."

So we're doing well.

Of course, it might seem to you that a science fiction writer only becomes respectable once he manages to crawl out of the pages of his stories and makes a name for himself outside.

Not so! In fact, the reverse is to be found. There are well-known scientists who have attempted to write science fiction, sometimes successfully, and who have published under their own names—making no effort whatever to hide their shame, because there is no shame connected with it. The well-known astronomer, Fred Hoyle, has been, until recently, the most spectacular example of this.

But now we have someone else. Right now, the best-known scientist in the world is the astronomer, Carl Sagan. He has written numerous articles on science for the general public, and has been a firmly outspoken opponent of such exercises in pseudo-scientific nonsense as Velikovskian catastrophes, von Dänikenish extraterrestrial visitations, and UFOlogical kidnappings.

He has written best-selling books such as *The Cosmic Connection* and *The Dragons of Eden* (the latter winning a Pulitzer Prize). He has become a remarkable television personality with, first, his appearance on nationally-syndicated talk shows, and then with his spectacular television series *Cosmos*. Following that, he put his *Cosmos* performance into book form and it became a runaway sales-phenomenon.

And in order to top all this, what is he doing?

Why, he is writing a science fiction novel!

Good for you, Carl! I'm proud of you.

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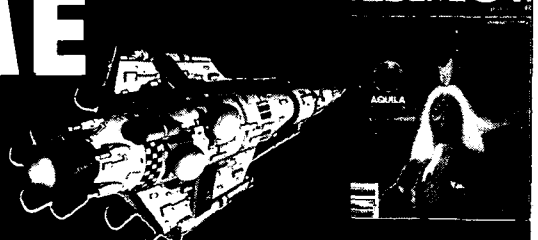

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With no manipulation and by sheer coincidence, I see an interesting phenomenon happening in this column as it appears from this end (I'm never sure what forces will take over and reshape it by the time I reach the other end); it's perhaps a first. The authors whose works I'm dealing with this time are predominantly female. It's a truism at this point that one of the nicest things to happen to science fiction in the past decade is the ever-growing and generally excellent contribution women are making to the field. But I can remember the days when the female authors could be counted on the fingers of one hand, when it simply wasn't done for a woman to write (or read, for that matter) SF, since it dealt with science and technology among other unladylike matters. So I still consider it worthy of note when the phenomenon makes itself evident, even though it may smack of ghettoization even to mention it.

I liked Elizabeth Lynn's *The Sardonyx Net* a whole lot. In it, she builds on the strengths she showed in her Tornor Trilogy (*Watchtower, The Dancers of Arun, The Northern Girl*) and improves on the weaknesses. It's laid in one of those far futures that are satisfyingly complex without being unduly complicated; while the action is for the most part confined to one world, it seems that there's a busy universe going on around it. And while that one world is sparsely

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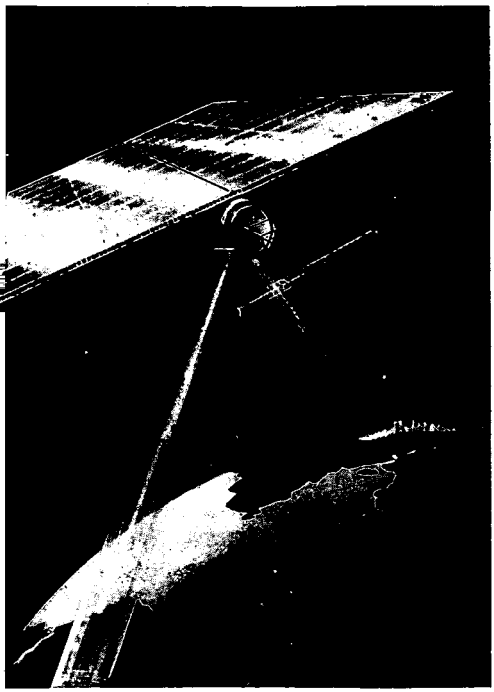

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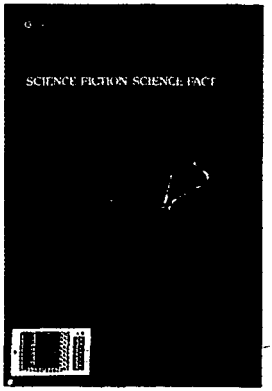

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inhabited, the population mostly being in one none-too-large city, the details of its culture, a convincing one, and the well-paced plot keep things very interesting indeed.

The novel opens with an interstellar drug hijacking; for a few pages I was afraid it was going to be one of those dreary druggy futures. Not so. The drug is dorazine, and it is absolutely necessary to the economy of the planet Chabad, since it keeps the slaves quiescent but productive. And Chabad, despite, or maybe because of its slave culture, is about as dreary and colorless as the antebellum South, though there aren't too many resemblances beyond that.

The hijackee, one Dana Ikoro, decides to go to Chabad to see if he can get his cargo back. Too cocky by half, he ends up a slave in the household of the brother and sister who head the Third Family of Chabad, Zed and Rhani Yago; the Yago clan control the slave and drug traffic of the planet, including the Sardonyx Net, the interstellar slaveship that collects the criminal slaves-to-be from the other worlds of the Sardonyx Sector.

This is anything but the usual story of a poor innocent sold into slavery, winning his freedom by pluck and luck, and eliminating the naughty slave trade on the way. But there are action, intrigue, revolting slaves, revolting masters, and other enjoyable matters in plenty. However, much of Lynn's plot hinges on her characters; her people have always been well-rounded and many-faceted (which, come to think of it, brings to mind some pretty oddly shaped creatures, but that's not what I mean), and those in *The Sardonyx Net* are no exception. Of those in the central triangle, Zed is a sexual sadist in reaction to his incestuous feelings for Rhani which aren't all that covert; Rhani seems too nice to be true if you discount the kind of insensitivity which leads her to dub a grown male slave Binkie after a childhood toy; and Dana is not just brash, but something of an all-around twit.

Not exactly a beguiling bunch, but they're interesting, and how they change in response to each other and the events in which they're involved is interesting, also. And there are some attractive supporting characters, such as the Family Kyneth, an outgoing clan that is reminiscent of the boisterous Rostovs of *War and Peace*.

The major problem I've had with Lynn's earlier work is a sort of long-lined evenness of tone that at times verged on blandness in plotting. You may gather from the above remarks that this is hardly the case with *The Sardonyx Net*. It's an engrossing and intelligent novel, certainly as good as almost anything being published in this heyday of the engrossing, intelligent SF novel.

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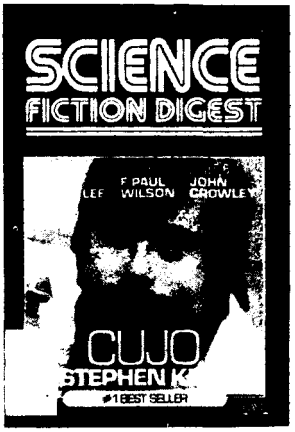

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Phyllis Eisenstein's *In the Hands of Glory* isn't quite up to that standard (it's shorter and less ambitious to start with), but it's still of interest. In it, our time in space occurs after the collapse of a Galactic Empire. The police/army of the Empire has maintained itself as a unit and more or less taken over the planet Amphora, an agrarian world with a low level of technology. After 80 years, the descendants of the original colonists are revolting (here we go again) in reaction to what they consider exploitation by the Patrol, which has established itself as a ruling elite.

While SF combines readily with almost every other genre (there are SF mysteries, SF thrillers, SF westerns even), some hybrids are rare. *In the Hands of Glory* is an SF love story, and that's one of the rare ones. And please, don't think I mean a syrupy romance purveyed to adolescent females of a certain mentality. But it is a Romeo and Juliet theme that is the backbone of the novel—Patrol girl and young rebel doctor—though it's decorated with derring-do, intrigue, and the inevitable attempt to capture the Citadel of the Patrol. There is a charming race of aliens involved, and some nice business with a proscribed book, in which the initial Commander of the Patrol on Amphora spills all.

My faintly praiseworthy damns for *In the Hands of Glory* really boil down to too many not-enoughs—not enough sense of an ongoing Universe outside Amphora (the planets of the late Empire are not totally isolated; there is still interstellar travel); not enough depth and variety in the dual Amphoran culture; not enough scope for the two major characters to be really interesting. But that implies, I hope, that there is something there to be not enough of. (How's that for convoluted opinion?)

The fact that a woman was writing the stories that were appearing under the name of James Tiptree, Jr., was a well-kept secret for some time (I particularly like the touch of the totally gratuitous *Jr.*), not an easy thing to do in the gabby world of science fiction. But it leaked out finally, and no one, so far as I know, fainted dead away from the shock. In the meantime, Mr./Ms. Tiptree was becoming a prime favorite among short story writers, and has remained so.

Here we have a new collection, *Out of the Everywhere and Other Extraordinary Visions*. It contains ten stories, four of which appeared under her nom de plume's nom de plume, Racoona Sheldon*, and

**Which leads me to share the nice story of the obviously bright and well-spoken little girl of about ten who walked into The Science Fiction Shop and asked for Ursula Le Guin's* Raccoon's World.

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two that are appearing here for the first time.

Those two are lengthy and solid enough to make it worth the price of admission, even if you know the others. The title story tells of a young being of immaterial sentience, a space dweller, who more or less crash-lands himself on Earth—*just* himself ("Look, Ma, no ship!")—and divides up, portions of his being entering three humans, whose odd lives we follow. It, by what is obviously sheer coincidence, contains two key elements that appear in the Lynn novel mentioned above: incest, and icebergs towed south for a water supply.

The other new story, "With Delicate Mad Hands," is about a lady who, through an accident at birth, looks like a pig. She lives in a regimented, space-faring future, and hijacks a vessel and heads out beyond the Solar System, where she finds an inhabited dark star on which lives a sort of pig Prince. This one is another SF love story, in this case a porcine Romeo and Juliet, since he is highly radioactive. Tiptree somehow manages to bring this off. I think.

On the whole, I find Tiptree's stories clever and facile. I don't mean that condescendingly. I'm not at all sure that, by their nature, you can ask short stories to be more than clever and facile, neat in idea and execution. Every once in a blue moon, one transcends this level (Moore's "Vintage Season," Sturgeon's "Skills of Xanadu"), but discounting those hen's teeth, Tiptree does about all a reader could want in the less-than-lengthy format.

Englishwoman Diana Wynne Jones has become known for her fantasies in a very short time; her latest, though, is a borderline case, based on the kind of play with reality that Le Guin handled in a slightly different key in *The Lathe of Heaven*. Since the basis of the novel is not anything supernatural (i.e. beyond the natural), I'd call *The Homeward Bounders* science fiction myself. But it's certainly open to question, as is a lot else about this work; the premise is very complex, and since it's published as a juvenile, one can only wonder. If this is what the kids are reading these days, the next 50 years should be very interesting indeed.

Anyhow, let's try and get across an idea of the idea. There are these beings, and *They* (it's always *They* or *Them*) play with reality—literally play, since all the worlds of various realities are game boards for war or strategy gaming. The hero, a 13-year-old boy named Jamie, comes across *Them* playing on this world, is declared a random factor, and is discarded to the Bounder circuits, which means he moves among the separate universes that are stacked together. Where they touch is the Boundary; when one of *Them*

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finishes a move, the Bounder gets twitched into another world.

And that's just the beginning. Jamie is thrown into world after world, each different; he runs into the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, and Prometheus; he picks up a group of fellow Bounders that includes Helen, who wears her hair in front of her face, Joris, a Robin to a superhero Batman who hunts demons, and Adam, who wants to sell his sister to the superhero. Are you following all this?

Not to worry. It comes to a conclusion that's somewhere between the last Narnia book and *The Players of Null-A*, and if it all doesn't quite jell, getting there is more than half the fun, anyway. Flashes of the sly but wacky humor that made *A Charmed Life* so wonderful start cropping up around halfway through, and that more than makes up for an ambiguity I would have found infuriating in less skillful hands.

In the words of the prophet . . . and now for something completely different. Here's something that's all macho and hairy-chested, presumably rack-jobbed into gun shops the way romances and Gothics are placed in supermarkets.

Growing in popularity is a subgenre that might be described as mercenary fiction, essentially the war story updated to our less-epic age. Lately *it* has been being combined with SF; an example is a recent series with the overall title of *The Survivalist*, by Jerry Ahern. The first book, *Total War*, gives us as hero John Thomas Rourke; and by hero I don't just mean leading character. He seems to earn his living as a mercenary; but has essentially devoted his life to learning how to survive anywhere, anyhow, through anything, because he knows what's coming.

And it comes. A Soviet invasion of Pakistan from Afghanistan mushrooms into total war (we follow the upper-level operations in some detail), and suddenly there's John, in what's left of Albuquerque, determined to cross the radioactive shambles of the U.S. (California, as usual, has fallen into the Pacific, and New York has been permanently tidal-waved) to Georgia, where he hopes are still his wife, kiddies, and that splendid little furnished cave in the hills that he's spent thousands on making a survival heaven.

By the end of the novel, we've barely gotten out of Albuquerque (the second and third of the series have appeared in rapid succession at this writing), so there's a long row to hoe. There is mayhem to spare here (John, in one day, does in about 70 people: looters, bikers, and other baddies), and in the first five pages there were more guns and miscellaneous weapons named specifically than I knew existed.

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BUT, despite all the carnage, there is not a gratuitous dwelling on the details of bloodletting that one finds nowadays in many books and films; the novel is adequately if not stylishly written; and there's legitimate excitement here. I thought the movies had given us every disaster possible, but how about being in a jetliner aloft when the bombs go off and the country is wiped out beneath you, and having pilot and copilot dead almost immediately from flash burns, leaving John and a lady with a couple of hours' flight experience to bring it down somewhere?

I mentioned a few months back that I thought, given the current state of things, that we might be in for another wave of end-of-the-world stories; *The Survivalist* series could be it all by itself.

Two worthy reprints to wind up (I'm grateful, by the way, to those who have written expressing *their* gratitude for the mention of older works they might have missed—the heritage of SF is so wonderful I can't ignore it). One is *Space Skimmer*, an early work by David Gerrold, an interesting writer who has done too little serious work in the field lately. This one's a little awkward around the edges, as might be expected from a very young author, but there are also some strikingly original concepts and images.

The *mise en scène* is a universe something like that of the Eisenstein novel mentioned earlier, one of many inhabited worlds some time after the collapse of a Galactic Empire. In this case, the Empire is not only collapsed, but lost, at least to Mass, the maybe too-aptly named native of a high-gravity planet. Some four hundred years after the fact, Mass sets out from his relatively backward world to find the remnants of Empire or the causes of its downfall.

It's one of those cumulative quests, like Dorothy's; he keeps picking up various unlikely people (a young Prince who's been in stasis for several centuries; an android segment of a hive mind; and even a Toto, an Andalusian Puff-Puppy—all very Ozzy); and between them and circumstances, his search meanders all over the Galaxy.

The story keeps getting interrupted for explanations and poetry (some of it quite funny, in fact), but it's a good one, nonetheless, and nice to have back in print.

The other reprint is a deserved classic, one of the best fantasies to have been written on this side of the Atlantic. It's Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword*. Set in Britain during that period when the Danes and Christianity are making strong inroads, it's the life-to-death chronicle of a changeling, stolen by Imric the elf-earl and raised in the elf mounds of England. It has the classic ingredients, such as

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incest (golly, that's the third time this month!*) and the broken sword of the title; perhaps the most wonderful thing about the book is Anderson's evocation of an entire world of faerie, proceeding mostly unnoticed in, about, and beyond the world of men. In the great war between trolls and elves, the allies are as exotic as shen from China and djinn from Arabia; when the changeling Skafloc sets out to have the sword reforged by the Jotuns, he is given aid by the Sidhe of Ireland and accompanied by Mananaan Mac Lir, the sea king; the Aesir weave their complicated plots about all.

This book is a stunner, and a must for every fantasy lover.

Finally, the announcement of publications by people associated with this magazine: *The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Science Fiction*, edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh, and Martin Harry Greenberg; *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories: Vol. 6 (1944)*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim.

**Incest, like charity, begins at home.*

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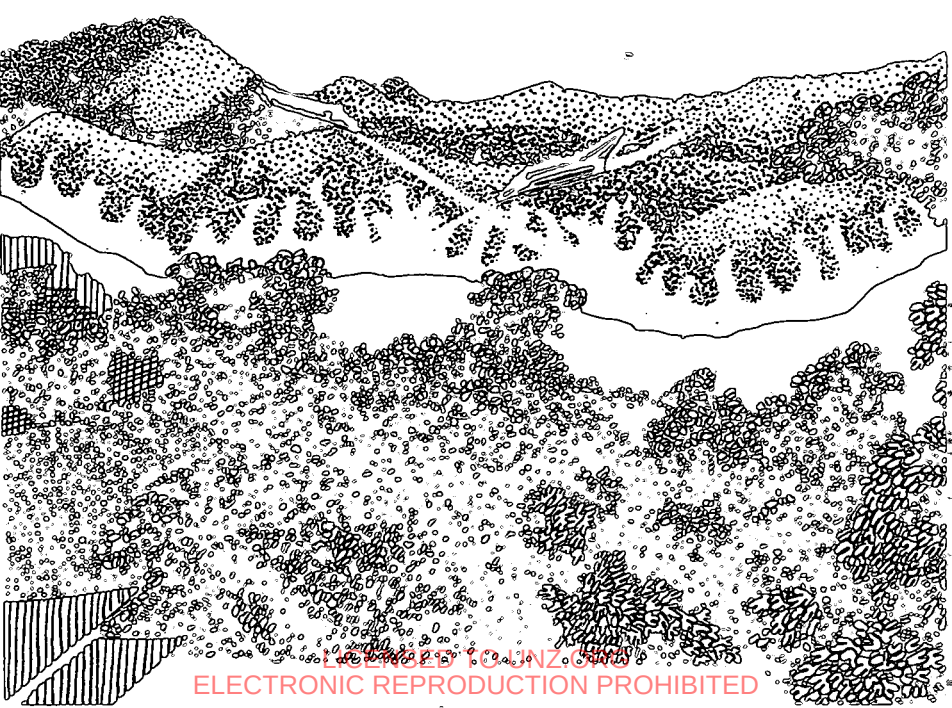
THE TIME OF THE BURNING

by Robert Silverberg

or Janet Aulisio



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Here is another tale of the great planet Majipoor, scene of the author's recent book, Lord Valentine's Castle.

The dry foothills were burning along a curving crest from Milimorn to Hamifieu; and even up here, in his eyrie fifty miles east on Zygnor Peak, Group Captain Eremoil could feel the hot blast of the wind and taste the charred flavor of the air. A dense crown of murky smoke rose over the entire range. In an hour or two the fliers would extend the fire-line from Hamifieu down to that little town at the base of the valley, and then tomorrow they'd torch the zone from there south to Sintalmond. And then this entire province would be ablaze, and woe betide any Shapeshifters who lingered in it.

"It won't be long now," Viggan said. "The war's almost over."

Eremoil looked up from his charts of the northwestern corner of the continent and stared at the subaltern. "Do you think so?" he asked vaguely.

"Thirty years. That's about enough."

"Not thirty. Five thousand years, six thousand, however long it's been since humans first came to this world. It's been war all the time, Viggan."

"For a lot of that time we didn't realize we were fighting a war, though."

"No," Eremoil said. "No, we didn't understand. But we understand now, don't we, Viggan?"

He turned his attention back to the charts, bending low, squinting, peering. The oily smoke in the air was bringing tears to his eyes and blurring his vision, and the charts were very finely drawn. Slowly he drew his pointer down the contour lines of the foothills below Hamifieu, checking off the villages on his report-sheets.

Every village along the arc of flame was marked on the charts, he hoped, and officers had visited each to bring notice of the burning. It would go hard for him and those beneath him if the mappers had left any place out, for Lord Stiamot had given orders that no human lives were to be lost in this climactic drive: all settlers were to be warned and given time to evacuate. The Metamorphs were being given the same warning. One did not simply roast one's enemies alive, Lord Stiamot had said repeatedly. One aimed only to bring them under one's control, and just now fire seemed to be the best means of doing that. Bringing the fire itself under control afterward

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might be a harder job, Eremoil thought, but that was not the problem of the moment.

"Kattikawn—Bizfern—Domgrave—Byelk—so many little towns, Viggan. Why do people want to live up here, anyway?"

"They say the land is fertile, sir. And the climate is mild, for such a northerly district."

"Mild? I suppose, if you don't mind half a year without rain." Eremoil coughed. He imagined he could hear the crackling of the distant fire through the tawny knee-high grass. On this side of Alhanroel it rained all winter long and then rained not at all the whole summer: a challenge for farmers, one would think, but evidently they had surmounted it, considering how many agricultural settlements had sprouted along the slopes of these hills and downward into the valleys that ran to the sea. This was the height of the dry season now, and the region had been baking under summer sun for months—dry, dry, dry, the dark soil cracked and gullied, the winter-growing grasses dormant and parched, the thick-leaved shrubs folded and waiting. What a perfect time to put the place to the torch and force one's stubborn enemies down to the edge of the ocean, or into it! But no lives lost, no lives lost—Eremoil studied his lists. "Chikmoge—Fualle—Daniup—Michimang—" Again he looked up. To the subaltern he said, "Viggan, what will you do after the war?"

"My family owns lands in the Glayge Valley. I'll be a farmer again, I suppose. And you, sir?"

"My home is in Stee. I was a civil engineer—aqueducts, sewage conduits, other such fascinating things. I can be that again. When did you last see the Glayge?"

"Four years ago," said Viggan.

"And five for me, since Stee. You were at the Battle of Treymone, weren't you?"

"Wounded. Slightly."

"Ever killed a Metamorph?"

"Yes, sir."

Eremoil said, "Not I. Never once. Nine years a soldier, never a life taken. Of course, I've been an officer. I'm not a good killer, I suspect."

"None of us are," said Viggan. "But when they're coming at you, changing shape five times a minute, with a knife in one hand and an axe in the other—or when you know they've raided your brother's land and murdered your nephew—"

"Is that what happened, Viggan?"

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"Not to me, sir. But to others, plenty of others. The atrocities—I don't need to tell you how—"

"No. No, you don't. What's this town's name, Viggan?"

The subaltern leaned over the charts. "Singaserin, sir. The lettering's a little smudged, but that's what it says. And it's on our list. See, here. We gave them notice day before yesterday."

"I think we've done them all, then."

"I think so, sir," said Viggan.

Eremoil shuffled the charts into a stack, put them away, and looked out again toward the west. There was a distinct line of demarcation between the zone of the burning and the untouched hills south of it, dark green and seemingly lush with foliage. But the leaves of those trees were shriveled and greasy from months without rain, and those hillsides would explode as though they had been bombed when the fire reached them. Now and again he saw little bursts of flame, no more than puffs of sudden brightness as though from the striking of a light. But it was a trick of distance, Eremoil knew; each of those tiny flares was the eruption of a vast new territory as the fire, carrying itself now by airborne embers where the fliers themselves were not spreading it, devoured the forests beyond Hamifieu.

Viggan said, "Messenger here, sir."

Eremoil turned. A tall young man in a sweaty uniform had clambered down from a mount and was staring uncertainly at him.

"Well?" he said.

"Captain Vanayle sent me, sir. Problem down in the valley. Settler won't evacuate."

"He'd better," Eremoil said, shrugging. "What town is it?"

"Between Kattikawn and Bizfern, sir. Substantial tract. The man's name is Kattikawn too, Aibil Kattikawn. He told Captain Vanayle that he holds his land by direct grant of the Pontifex Dvorn, that his people have been here thousands of years, and that he isn't going to—"

Eremoil sighed and said, "I don't care if he holds his land by direct grant of the Divine. We're burning that district tomorrow and he'll fry if he stays there."

"He knows that, sir."

"What does he want us to do? Make the fire go around his farm, eh?" Eremoil waved his arm impatiently. "Evacuate him, regardless of what he is or isn't going to do."

"We've tried that," said the messenger. "He's armed and he offered resistance. He says he'll kill anyone who tries to remove him from

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his land."

"Kill?" Eremoil said, as though the word had no meaning. *"Kill?* Who talks of killing other human beings? The man is crazy. Send fifty troops and get him on his way to one of the safe zones."

"I said he offered resistance, sir. There was an exchange of fire. Captain Vanayle believes that he can't be removed without loss of life. Captain Vanayle asks that you go down in person to reason with the man, sir."

"That *I*—"

Viggan said quietly, "It may be the simplest way. These big landholders can be very difficult."

"Let Vanayle go to him," Eremoil said.

"Captain Vanayle has already attempted to parley with the man, sir," the messenger said. "He was unsuccessful. This Kattikawn demands an audience with Lord Stiamot. Obviously that's impossible, but perhaps if you were to go—"

Eremoil considered it. It was absurd for the commanding officer of the district to undertake such a task. It was Vanayle's direct responsibility to clear the territory before tomorrow's burning; it was Eremoil's to remain up here and direct the action. On the other hand, clearing the territory was ultimately Eremoil's responsibility also; and Vanayle had plainly failed to do it; and sending in a squad to make a forcible removal would probably end in Kattikawn's death and the deaths of a few soldiers too, which was hardly a useful outcome. Why not go? Eremoil nodded slowly. Protocol be damned: he would not stand on ceremony. He had nothing significant left to do this afternoon and Viggan could look after any details that came up. And if he could save one life, one stupid stubborn old man's life, by taking a little ride down the mountainside—

"Get my floater," he said to Viggan.

"Sir?"

"Get it. Now, before I change my mind. I'm going down to see him."

"But Vanayle has already—"

"Stop being troublesome, Viggan. I'll only be gone a short while. You're in command here until I get back, but I don't think you'll have to work very hard. Can you handle it?"

"Yes, sir," the subaltern said glumly.

It was a longer journey than Eremoil expected, nearly two hours down the switchbacked road to the base of Zygnor Peak, then across the uneven sloping plateau to the foothills that ringed the coastal plain. The air was hotter though less smoky down there; shimmering

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heat-waves spawned mirages, and made the landscape seem to melt and flow. The road was empty of traffic; but he was stopped again and again by panicky migrating beasts, strange animals of species that he could not identify, fleeing wildly from the fire zone ahead. Shadows were beginning to lengthen by the time Eremoil reached the foothill settlements. Here the fire was a tangible presence, like a second sun in the sky; Eremoil felt the heat of it against his cheek, and a fine grit settled on his skin and clothing.

The places he had been checking on his lists now became uncomfortably real to him: Byelk, Domgrave, Bizfern. One was just like the next, a central huddle of shops and public buildings, an outer residential rim, a ring of farms radiating outward beyond that, each town tucked in its little valley where some stream cut down out of the hills and lost itself on the plain. They were all empty now, or nearly so; just a few stragglers left, the others already on the highways leading to the coast. Eremoil supposed that he could walk into any of these houses and find books, carvings, souvenirs of holidays abroad, even pets, perhaps, abandoned in grief; and tomorrow all this would be ashes. But this territory was infested with Shapeshifters. The settlers here had lived for centuries under the menace of an implacable, savage foe that flitted in and out of the forests in masquerade, disguised as one's friend, one's lover, one's son; on errands of murder, a secret quiet war between the dispossessed and those who had come after them, a war that had been inevitable since the early outposts on Majipoor had grown into cities and sprawling agricultural territories that consumed more and more of the domain of the natives. Some remedies involve drastic cautery: in this final convulsion of the struggle between humans and Shapeshifters there was no help for it, Byelk and Domgrave and Bizfern must be destroyed so that the agony could end. Yet that did not make it easy to face abandoning one's home, Eremoil thought, nor was it even particularly easy to destroy someone else's home, as he had been doing for days, unless one did it from a distance, from a comfortable distance where all this torching was only a strategic abstraction.

Beyond Bizfern the foothills swung westward a long way, the road following their contour. There were good streams here, almost little rivers, and the land was heavily forested where it had not been cleared for planting. Yet even here the months without rain had left the forests terribly combustible, drifts of dead fallen leaves everywhere, fallen branches, old cracked trunks.

"This is the place, sir," the messenger said.

Eremoil beheld a box canyon, narrow at its mouth and much

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broader within, with a stream running down its middle. Against the gathering shadows he made out an impressive manor, a great white building with a roof of green tiles, and beyond that what seemed to be an immense acreage of crops. Armed guards were waiting at the mouth of the canyon. This was no simple farmer's spread; this was the domain of one who regarded himself as a duke. Eremoil saw trouble in store.

He dismounted and strode toward the guards, who regarded him coldly and held their energy-throwers at the ready. To one that seemed the most imposing he said, "Group Captain Eremoil to see Aibil Kattikawn."

"The Kattikawn is awaiting Lord Stiamot," was the flat, chilly reply.

"Lord Stiamot is occupied elsewhere. I represent him today. I am Group Captain Eremoil, commanding officer in this district."

"We are instructed to admit only Lord Stiamot."

"Tell your master," Eremoil said wearily, "that the Coronal sends his regrets and asks him to offer his grievances to Group Captain Eremoil instead."

The guard seemed indifferent to that. But after a moment he spun around and entered the canyon. Eremoil watched him walking unhurriedly along the bank of the stream until he disappeared in the dense shrubbery of the plaza before the manor house. A long time passed; the wind changed, bringing a hot gust from the fire zone, a layer of dark air that stung the eyes and scorched the throat. Eremoil envisioned a coating of black gritty particles on his lungs. But from here, in this sheltered place, the fire itself was invisible.

Eventually the guard returned, just as unhurriedly.

"The Kattikawn will see you," he announced.

Eremoil beckoned to his driver and his guide, the messenger. But Kattikawn's guard shook his head.

"Only you, captain."

The driver looked disturbed. Eremoil waved her back. "Wait for me here," he said. "I don't think I'll be long."

He followed the guard down the canyon path to the manor house.

From Aibil Kattikawn he expected the same sort of hard-eyed welcome that the guards had offered, but Eremoil had underestimated the courtesy a provincial aristocrat would feel obliged to provide. Kattikawn greeted him with a warm smile and an intense, searching stare, gave him what seemed to be an unfeigned embrace and led him into the great house, which was sparsely furnished but elegant in its stark and rugged way. Exposed beams of oiled black

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wood dominated the vaulted ceilings; hunting trophies loomed high on the walls; the furniture was massive and plainly ancient. The whole place had an archaic air. So too did Aibil Kattikawn. He was a big man, much taller than the lightly-built Eremoil and broad through the shoulders, a breadth dramatically enhanced by the heavy steetmoy-fur cloak he wore. His forehead was high, his hair gray but thick, rising in heavy ridges; his eyes were dark, his lips thin. In every aspect he was of the most imposing presence.

When he had poured bowls of some glistening amber wine and they had had the first sips, Kattikawn said, "So you need to burn my lands?"

"We must burn this entire province, I'm afraid."

"A stupid stratagem, perhaps the most foolish thing in the whole history of human warfare. Do you know how valuable the produce of this district is? Do you know how many generations of hard work have gone into building these farms?"

"The entire zone from Milimorn to Sintalmond and beyond is a center of Metamorph guerrilla activity, the last one remaining in Alhanroel. The Coronal is determined to end this ugly war finally, and it can only be done by smoking the Shapeshifters out of their hiding places in these hills."

"There are other methods."

"We have tried them and they have failed," Eremoil said.

"Have you? Have you tried moving from inch to inch through the forests searching for them? Have you moved every soldier on Majipoor in here to conduct the mopping-up operations? Of course not. It's too much trouble. It's much simpler to send out those fliers and set the whole place on fire."

"This war has consumed an entire generation of our lives."

"And the Coronal grows impatient toward the end," said Kattikawn. "At my expense."

"The Coronal is a master of strategy. The Coronal has defeated a dangerous and almost incomprehensible enemy and has made Majipoor safe for human occupation for the first time—all but this district."

"We have managed well enough with these Metamorphs skulking all around us, captain. I haven't been massacred yet. I've been able to handle them. They haven't been remotely as much of a threat to my welfare as my own government seems to be. Your Coronal, captain, is a fool."

Eremoil controlled himself. "Future generations will hail him as a hero among heroes."

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"Very likely," said Kattikawn. "That's the kind that usually gets made into heroes. I tell you that it was not necessary to destroy an entire province in order to round up the few thousand aborigines that remain at large. I tell you that it is a rash and shortsighted move on the part of a tired general who is in a hurry to return to the ease of Castle Mount."

"Be that as it may, the decision has been taken; and everything from Milimorn to Hamifieu is already ablaze."

"So I have noticed."

"The fire is advancing toward Kattikawn village. Perhaps by dawn the outskirts of your own domain will be threatened. During the day we'll continue the incendiary attacks past this region and on south as far as Sintalmond."

"Indeed," said Kattikawn calmly.

"This area will become an inferno. We ask you to abandon it while you still have time."

"I choose to remain, captain."

Eremoil let his breath out slowly. "We cannot be responsible for your safety if you do."

"No one has ever been responsible for my safety except myself."

"What I'm saying is that you'll die, and die horribly. We have no way of laying down the fire line in such a way as to avoid your domain."

"I understand."

"You ask us to murder you, then."

"I ask nothing of the sort. You and I have no transaction at all. You fight your war; I maintain my home. If the fire that your war requires should intrude on the territory I call my own, so much the worse for me, but no murder is involved. We are bound on independent courses, Captain Eremoil."

"Your reasoning is strange . You will die as a direct result of our incendiary attack. Your life will be on our souls."

"I remain here of free will, after having been duly warned," said Kattikawn. "My life will be on my own soul alone."

"And your people's lives? They'll die too."

"Those who choose to remain, yes. I've given them warning of what is about to happen. Three have set out for the coast. The rest will stay. Of their own will, and not to please me. This is our place. Another bowl of wine, captain?"

Eremoil refused, then instantly changed his mind and proffered the empty bowl. Kattikawn, as he poured, said, "Is there no way I can speak with Lord Stiamot?"

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"None."

"I understand the Coronal is in this area."

"Half a day's journey, yes. But he is inaccessible to such petitioners."

"By design, I imagine." Kattikawn smiled. "Do you think he's gone mad, Eremoil?"

"The Coronal? Not at all."

"This burning, though—such a desperate move, such an idiotic move. The reparations he'll have to pay afterward—millions of royals; it'll bankrupt the treasury; it'll cost more than fifty castles as grand as the one he's built on top of the Mount. And for what? Give us two or three more years and we'd have the Shapeshifters tamed."

"Or five or ten or twenty," said Eremoil. "This must be the end of the war, now, this season. This ghastly convulsion, this shame on everyone, this stain, this long nightmare—"

"Oh, you think the war's been a mistake, then?"

Eremoil quickly shook his head. "The fundamental mistake was made long ago, when our ancestors chose to settle on a world that was already inhabited by an intelligent species. By our time we had no choice but to crush the Metamorphs, or else retreat entirely from Majipoor; and how could we do that?"

"Yes," Kattikawn said, "how could we give up the homes that had been ours and our forebears' for so long, eh?"

Eremoil ignored the heavy irony. "We took this planet from an unwilling people. For thousands of years we attempted to live in peace with them, until we admitted that coexistence was impossible. Now we are imposing our will by force, which is not beautiful, because the alternatives are even worse."

"What will Lord Stiamot do with the Shapeshifters he has in his internment camps? Plough them under as fertilizer for the fields he's burned?"

"They'll be given a vast reservation in Zimroel," said Eremoil. "Half a continent to themselves—that's hardly cruelty. Alhanroel will be ours, and an ocean between us. Already the resettlement is under way. Only your area remains unpacified. Lord Stiamot has taken upon himself the terrible burden of responsibility for a harsh but necessary act, and the future will hail him for it."

"I hail him now," said Kattikawn. "O wise and just Coronal! Who in his infinite wisdom destroys this land so that his world need not have the bother of troublesome aborigines lurking about. It would have been better for me, Eremoil, if he had been less noble of spirit, this hero-king of yours. Or more noble, perhaps. He'd seem much

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more wondrous to me if he'd chosen some slower method of conquering these last holdouts. Thirty years of war—what's another two or three?"

"This is the way he has chosen. The fires are approaching this place as we speak."

"Let them come. I'll be here, defending my house against them."

"You haven't seen the fire zone," Eremoil said. "Your defense won't last ten seconds. The fire eats everything in its way."

"Quite likely. I'll take my chances."

"I beg you—"

"You beg? Are you a beggar, then? What if I were to beg? I beg you, captain, spare my estate!"

"It can't be done. I beg you indeed: retreat, and spare your life and the lives of your people."

"What would you have me do, go crawling along that highway to the coast, and live in some squalid little cabin in Alaisor or Bailemoona? Wait on table at an inn, or sweep the streets, or curry mounts in a stable? This is my place. I would rather die here in ten seconds tomorrow than live a thousand years in cowardly exile." Kattikawn walked to the window. "It grows dark, captain. Will you be my guest for dinner?"

"I am unable to stay, I regret to tell you."

"Does this dispute bore you? We can talk of other things. I would prefer that."

Eremoil reached for the other man's great paw of a hand. "I have obligations at my headquarters. It would have been an unforgettable pleasure to accept your hospitality. I wish it were possible. Will you forgive me for declining?"

"It pains me to see you leave unfed. Do you hurry off to Lord Stiamot?"

Eremoil was silent.

"I would ask you to gain me an audience with him," said Kattikawn.

"It can't be done, and it would do no good. Please: leave this place tonight. Let us dine together, and then abandon your domain."

"This is my place, and here I remain," Kattikawn said. "I wish you well, captain, a long and harmonious life. And I thank you for this conversation." He closed his eyes a moment and inclined his head: a tiny bow, a delicate dismissal. Eremoil moved toward the door of the great hall. Kattikawn said, "The other officer thought he would pull me out of here by force. You had more sense, and I compliment you. Farewell, Captain Eremoil."

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Eremoil searched for appropriate words, found none, and settled for a gesture of salute.

Kattikawn's guards led him back to the mouth of his canyon, where Eremoil's driver and the messenger waited, playing some game with dice by the side of the floater. They snapped to attention when they saw Eremoil, but he signalled them to relax. He looked off to the east, at the great mountains that rose on the far side of the valley. In these northerly latitudes, on this summer night, the sky was still light, even to the east; and the heavy bulk of Zygnor Peak lay across the horizon like a black wall against the pale gray of the sky. South of it was its twin, Mount Haimon, where the Coronal had made his headquarters. Eremoil stood for a time studying the two mighty peaks, and the foothills below them, and the pillar of fire and smoke that ascended on the other side, and the moons just coming into the sky; then he shook his head and turned and looked back toward Aibil Kattikawn's manor, disappearing now in the shadows of the late dusk. In his rise through the army ranks Eremoil had come to know dukes and princes and many other high ones that a mere civil engineer does not often meet in private life; and he had spent more than a little time with the Coronal himself and the intimate circle of advisors around him; and yet he thought he had never encountered anyone quite like this Kattikawn, who was either the most noble or the most misguided man on the planet, and perhaps both.

"Let's go," he said to the driver. "Take the Haimon road."

"The Haimon, sir?"

"To the Coronal, yes. Can you get us there by midnight?"

The road to the southern peak was much like the Zygnor road, but steeper and not as well paved. In darkness its twists and turns would probably be dangerous at the speed Eremoil's driver, a woman of Stoien, was risking; but the red glow of the fire zone lit up the valley and the foothills and much reduced the risks. Eremoil said nothing during the long journey. There was nothing to say: how could the driver or the messenger-lad possibly understand the nature of Aibil Kattikawn? Eremoil himself, on first hearing that one of the local farmers refused to leave his land, had misunderstood that nature, imagining some crazy old fool, some stubborn fanatic blind to the realities of his peril. Kattikawn was stubborn, surely; and possibly he could be called a fanatic; but he was none of the other things, not even crazy, however crazy his philosophy might seem to those, like Eremoil, who lived by other codes.

He wondered what he was going to tell Lord Stiamot.

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No use rehearsing: words would come or they would not. He slipped after a time into a kind of waking sleep, his mind lucid but frozen, contemplating nothing, calculating nothing. The floater, moving lightly and swiftly up the dizzying road, climbed out of the valley and into the jagged country beyond. At midnight it was still in the lower reaches of Mount Haimon, but no matter: the Coronal was known to keep late hours, often not to sleep at all. Eremoil did not doubt he would be available.

Somewhere on the upper slopes of Haimon he dropped without any awareness of it into sleep; and he was surprised and confused when the messenger shook him gently awake, saying, "This is Lord Stiamot's camp, sir." Blinking, disoriented, Eremoil found himself still sitting erect, his legs cramped, his back stiff. The moons were far across the sky, and the night now was black except for the

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amazing fiery gash that tore across it to the west. Awkwardly Eremoil scrambled from the floater. Even now, in the middle of the night, the Coronal's camp was a busy place, messengers running to and fro, lights burning in many of the buildings. An adjutant appeared, recognized Eremoil, gave him an exceedingly formal salute. "This visit comes as a surprise, Captain Eremoil!"

"To me also, I'd say. Is Lord Stiamot in the camp?"

"The Coronal is holding a staff meeting. Does he expect you, captain?"

"No," said Eremoil. "But I need to speak with him."

The adjutant was undisturbed by that. Staff meetings in the middle of the night, regional commanders turning up unannounced for conferences—well, why not? This was war, and protocols were improvised from day to day. Eremoil followed the man through the camp to an octagonal tent that bore the starburst insignia of the Coronal. A ring of guards surrounded the place, as grim and dedicated-looking as those who had held the mouth of Kattikawn's canyon. There had been four attempts on Lord Stiamot's life in the past eighteen months—all Metamorphs, all thwarted. No Coronal in Majipoor's history had ever died violently, but none had ever waged war, either, before this one.

The adjutant spoke with the commander of the guard; suddenly Eremoil found himself at the center of a knot of armed men, with lights shining maddeningly into his eyes and fingers digging painfully into his arms. For an instant the onslaught astonished him. But then he regained his poise and said, "What is this? I am Group Captain Eremoil."

"Unless you're a Shapeshifter," one of the men said.

"And you think you'd find that out by squeezing me and blinding me with your glare?"

"There are ways," said another.

Eremoil laughed. "None that ever proved reliable. But go on: test me, and do it fast. I must speak with Lord Stiamot."

They did indeed have tests. Someone gave him a strip of green paper and told him to touch his tongue to it. He did, and the paper turned orange. Someone else asked for a snip of his hair, and set fire to it. Eremoil looked on in amazement. It was a month since he had last been to the Coronal's camp, and none of these practices had been employed then; there must have been another assassination attempt, he decided, or else some quack scientist had come among them with these techniques. So far as Eremoil knew, there was no true way to distinguish a Metamorph from an authentic human

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when the Metamorph had taken on human form, except through dissection, and he did not propose to submit to that.

"You pass," they said at last. "You can go in."

But they accompanied him. Eremoil's eyes, dazzled already, adjusted with difficulty to the dimness of the Coronal's tent, but after a moment he saw half a dozen figures at the far end, and Lord Stiamot among them. They seemed to be praying. He heard murmured invocations and responses, bits of the old scripture. Was this the sort of staff meetings the Coronal held now? Eremoil went forward and stood a few yards from the group. He knew only one of the Coronal's attendants, Damlang of Bibiroon, who was generally considered second or third in line for the throne; the others did not seem even to be soldiers, for they were older men, in civilian dress, with a soft citified look about them, poets, dream-speakers perhaps, certainly not warriors. But the war was almost over.

The Coronal looked in Eremoil's direction without seeming to notice him.

Eremoil was startled by Lord Stiamot's harried, ragged look. The Coronal had been growing visibly older all through the past three years of the war, but the process seemed to have accelerated now: he appeared shrunken, colorless, frail, his skin parched, his eyes dull. He might have been a hundred years old; and yet he was no older than Eremoil himself, a man in middle life. Eremoil could remember the day Stiamot had come to the throne, and how Stiamot had vowed that day to end the madness of this constant undeclared warfare with the Metamorphs, to collect the planet's ancient natives and remove them from the territories settled by mankind. Only thirty years, and the Coronal looked the better part of a century older; but he had spent his reign in the field, as no Coronal before him had done and probably none after him ever would do, campaigning in the Glayge Valley, in the hotlands of the south, in the dense forests of the northeast, in the rich plains along the Gulf of Stoien, year after year encircling the Shapeshifters with his twenty armies and penning them in camps. And now he was nearly finished with the job, just the guerrillas of the northwest remaining at liberty—a constant struggle, a long fierce life of war, with scarcely time to return to the tender springtime of Castle Mount for the pleasures of the throne. Eremoil had occasionally wondered, as the war went on and on, how Lord Stiamot would respond if the Pontifex should die, and he be called upward to the other kingship and be forced to take up residence in the Labyrinth: would he decline, and retain the Coronal's crown so that he might remain in the field? But

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the Pontifex was in fine health, so it was said, and here was Lord Stiamot now a tired little old man, looking to be at the edge of the grave himself. Eremoil understood abruptly what Aibil Kattikawn had failed to comprehend, why it was that Lord Stiamot was so eager to bring the final phase of the war to its conclusion regardless of cost.

The Coronal said, "Who do we have there? Is that Finiwain?"

"Eremoil, my lord. In command of the forces carrying out the burning."

"Eremoil. Yes. Eremoil. I recall. Come, sit with us. We are giving thanks to the Divine for the end of the war, Eremoil. These people have come to me from my mother the Lady of the Isle, who guards us in dreams, and we will spend the night in songs of praise and gratitude, for in the morning the circle of fire will be complete. Eh, Eremoil? Come, sit, sing with us. You know the songs to the Lady, don't you?"

Eremoil heard the Coronal's cracked and frayed voice with shock. That faded thread of dry sound was all that remained of his once majestic tone. This hero, this demigod, was withered and ruined by his long campaign; there was nothing left of him; he was a spectre, a shadow. Seeing him like this, Eremoil wondered if Lord Stiamot had ever been the mighty figure of memory, or if perhaps that was only mythmaking and propaganda, and the Coronal had all along been less than met the eye.

Lord Stiamot beckoned. Eremoil reluctantly moved closer.

He thought of what he had come here to say. *My lord, there is a man in the path of the fire who will not move and will not allow himself to be moved, and who cannot be moved without the loss of life; and, my lord, he is too fine a man to be destroyed in this way. So I ask you, my lord, to halt the burning, perhaps to devise some alternative strategy, so that we may seize the Metamorphs as they flee the fire zone but do not need to extend the destruction beyond the point it already reaches, because—*

No.

He saw the utter impossibility of asking the Coronal to delay the end of the war a single hour. Not for Kattikawn's sake, not for Eremoil's sake, not for the sake of the holy Lady his mother could the burning be halted now, for these were the last days of the war and the Coronal's need to proceed to the end was the overriding force that swept all else before it. Eremoil might try to halt the burning on his own authority, but he could not ask the Coronal for approval.

Lord Stiamot thrust his head toward Eremoil.

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"What is it, captain? What bothers you? Here. Sit by me. Sing with us, captain. Raise your voice in thanksgiving."

They began a hymn, some tune Eremoil did not know. He hummed along, improvising a harmony. After that they sang another, and another, and that one Eremoil did know; he sang, but in a hollow and tuneless way. Dawn could not be far off now. Quietly he moved into the shadows and out of the tent. Yes, there was the sun, beginning to cast the first greenish light along the eastern face of Mount Haimon, though it would be an hour or more before its rays climbed the mountain wall and illuminated the doomed valleys to the southwest. Eremoil yearned for a week of sleep. He looked for the adjutant and said, "Will you send a message for me to my subaltern on Zygnor Peak?"

"Of course, sir."

"Tell him to take charge of the next phase of the burning and proceed as scheduled. I'm going to remain here during the day and will return to my headquarters this evening, after I've had some rest."

"Yes, sir."

Eremoil turned away and looked toward the west, still wrapped in night except where the terrible glow of the fire zone illuminated it. Probably Aibil Kattikawn had been busy all this night with pumps and hoses, wetting down his lands. It would do no good, of course; a fire of that magnitude takes all in its path, and burns until no fuel is left. So Kattikawn would die and the tiled roof of the manor house would collapse, and there was no helping it. He could be saved only at the risk of the lives of innocent soldiers, and probably not even then; or he could be saved if Eremoil chose to disregard the orders of Lord Stiamot, but not for long. So he will die. After nine years in the field, Eremoil thought, I am at last the cause of taking a life, and he is one of our own citizens. So be it. So be it.

He remained at the lookout post, weary but unable to move on, another hour or so, until he saw the first explosions of flame in the foothills near Bizfern, or maybe Domgrave, and knew that the morning's incendiary bombing had begun. The war will soon be over, he told himself. The last of our enemies now flee toward the safety of the coast, where they will be interned and transported overseas; and the world will be quiet again. He felt the warmth of the summer sun on his back and the warmth of the spreading fires on his cheeks. The world will be quiet again, he thought, and went to find a place to sleep.

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CROSSING NUMBERS ON PHOEBE
by Martin Gardner

In the middle of the twenty-first century, when all government controls over biological research were lifted in the United States, genetic engineering got a bit out of hand. Hundreds of strange humanoid types were created, some of which bred rapidly. One of the most intelligent species was called *toroidus bimandibulus,* or tor for short, because its members were shaped like doughnuts and they had two mouths.

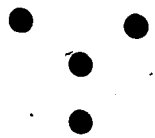
Arkay Guy, an ordinary human who was studying graph theory at the University of Michigan, was sitting in a campus hangout having beer with an attractive tor named Phoebe Snow.

"Professor Frank Hoorayri introduced us to crossing numbers this afternoon," said Arkay. "Do you know what a crossing number is?"

Phoebe shook her snow-white, hairless head.

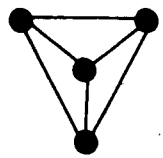
"It's really very simple. A graph, you know, consists of points joined by lines. If a line connects every pair of points, the graph is called complete. Take, for instance, the complete graph for four points."

Arkay took out his pen and made four points on a paper napkin in the pattern shown below:



Phoebe put a hand over her left mouth and giggled. "It looks just like you."

"So it does," said Arkay as he joined all pairs of points like so:



"As you see," he went on, "I've made a complete graph without any lines intersecting one another. If you can draw a graph like that, it's said to have a crossing number of zero. Now let's add a fifth

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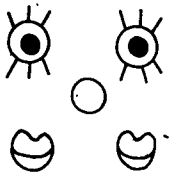
point and make it look like *your* face."

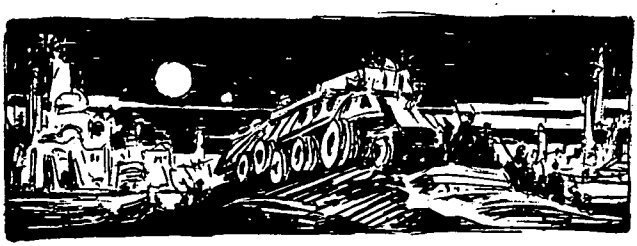


"Suppose," said Arkay, "you drew lipstick lines on your skin and tried to connect every pair of your five facial features—your beautiful green eyes, your snub nose, and your two purple mouths. The lines can twist around any way you like provided they don't go through any of the points. You'll find you can't do it without at least two lines crossing somewhere. So the crossing number for *your* face is one. Of course you could draw the complete graph with more than one crossing. But the crossing number is defined as the *smallest* number of crossings required. It's one of the graph's fundamental topological properties."

"Sorry," said Phoebe with her right mouth, while her left mouth guzzled beer, "but you couldn't be more wrong. My face has a crossing number of zero, just like yours."

"Impossible!" snorted Arkay, slapping the table.

Phoebe took a lipstick cylinder from her shoulder bag and quickly drew on her skin a complete graph for her eyes, nose and two mouths. There was not a single crossing! How did she do it? To find out, turn to page 47.



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GREAT MYSTERIES EXPLAINED!
by John Sladek

John Sladek is one of the most capable humorists in science fiction. He has written a wide variety of short stories, some of which can be found in The Best of John Sladek *(Pocket Books), and several novels, including* Mechasm, The Müller-Fokker Effect, Roderick, *and* Black Alice *(with Thomas Disch). His* The New Aprocrypha *is a witty debunking of crank cults and crackpot theories. He is married; has a daughter, Dorothea, age 2; and has lived in London since 1967.*

Science no longer confines itself to answering the kind of question no one ever asks ("But tell me, how *do* slime molds communicate?"). Instead, scientists are emerging from their stuffy labs into the real world, to tackle a few real-life mysteries:

1. **Who killed Kennedy?** The Dealey Plaza demise remains the number-one mystery of our age. The Warren Commission concluded only that Kennedy was shot by one person using one bullet, or by several persons using several bullets, but probably not by several persons sharing the same bullet. But this leaves many unanswered questions:

Was Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas Book Depository merely to deposit a Texas book? What of the FBI? The CIA? The Better Business Bureau? Could the President have conceivably been cleaning a gun in his car at the time?

Demographers may try a fresh approach to the problem: Since *everyone in the world remembers where he or she was at the moment the shot was fired,* why not put all those alibis into one computer and check them out? Careful cross-checking could eliminate billions of suspects and narrow it down to one or two persons who remember being in Dealey Plaza with rifles.

2. **Is the Turin shroud genuine?** Light may be shed on this

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mystery by the recent discovery of a similar relic, the Neapolitan shroud. This is very like the Turin object, but comes in three colors. Tourists maintain it is the burial shroud of Christ; skeptics insist it is an old beach towel.

Science at first did little to help resolve the controversy. Carbon-14 tests established its date as A.D. 1953 ± 18 million years. X-ray analysis showed the shroud to have an abcess in an upper left incisor that needs immediate attention. For chemical analysis one corner was removed and the remainder burnt—revealing it to be woven of some kind of fiber.

The big breakthrough was the discovery of a curious symbol on the surviving corner. Scholars now believe it is the authentic laundry mark of Joseph of Arimathea. Tough luck, Turin.

3. **Can human beings be cloned?** Some journalists claim certain rich men are hiring biologists to clone them. Other journalists think clones are pointy cylinders.

A clone is an exact genetic replica of someone, reared in a test tube and therefore somewhat sensitive to the sound of breaking glass. A clone gets all of his or her chromosomes from one parent, as well as all of his or her allowance. Clones who develop Oedipal problems have only themselves to blame.

Why should rich men go around cloning themselves? First, there are tax advantages in claiming yourself as hundreds of dependents. Clones can sign your checks, answer your phone and break in new shoes, and perform hundreds of other services before they break down with an acute identity crisis. (Psychiatrists will soon encounter a new syndrome, *cloneliness.*)

Responsible geneticists pooh-pooh the idea. Carrot clones, yes. Frogs, maybe. Humans? Pooh-pooh. There are insuperable technical problems, such as how to make very large test tubes.

But what if they are wrong? What if thousands of Howard Hughes clones are hiding away in Las Vegas hotel rooms?

What if China develops a clone weapon—a phalanx of waiters *who look exactly alike*—to cause the final confusion and collapse of the decadent West?

What if the Osmonds . . . ? But enough speculation. "The rich," Scott Fitzgerald said to Ernest Hemingway, "are not like you and me." Soon the rich may be exactly like everybody—only more so.

4. **Is there intelligent life anywhere in the universe?** The great UFO debate began in 1947 when a retired army major, flying over

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the Cascade mountains, saw a group of strange objects flying in formation. He circled for a closer look and saw that they were geese. He did not report this unusual experience for fear of being branded a hoaxer or a lunatic. Later someone else reported seeing Faust in Hell; a reporter's mishearing of "frying sorcerer" made world headlines.

Suddenly everyone saw things in the sky: A Navy pilot saw baskets of peaches over Alaska. Four boy scouts saw a flying tickertape machine that turned into a chicken salad sandwich without mayonnaise. One police chief chased a saucer for two hours, but failed to get its license number. Elsewhere saucers caused cars to run out of gas, and stole underwear off clotheslines.

Finally the Air Force promised to investigate all sightings of "uninteresting flying objects," or UFOs. Their report, now declassified, breaks down sightings into several categories: meteorites, mirages, hoaxes, Wedgwood, etc. There remains at bottom a tiny residue of saucer cases that cannot be eliminated (not to be confused with the residue in the bottoms of saucers, which you can eliminate with baking soda: soak one hour and scrub). For instance:

Mr A, 73, watched a bright light descend and land on his lawn sprinkler. Ten tiny George Washingtons leapt out, bound him hand and foot, and forced him to eat a magnetized pizza.

Mr B, 12, took the only known clear, detailed movie of a saucer, showing a large complex structure with portholes, flaming jets, colored lights and an upper deck on which naked aliens could be seen playing shuffleboard. But the drugstore refused to develop this film.

The Air Force will soon declassify evidence confirming that UFOs are from space. Aliens have for centuries been trying to contact us, probably to borrow money. They travel the galaxy in a mother ship. Smaller craft descend to explore our planet, remaining below until the mother ship tells them to come back up and wash their hands for dinner.

HAIKU FOR PIONEER 11

First to arc above
the planets and Sun, you saw
them all—eggs nesting.

—Robert Frazier

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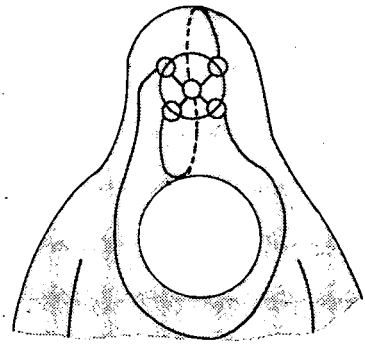
SOLUTION TO CROSSING NUMBERS ON PHOEBE

(from page 43)



The illustration above shows how Phoebe connected her five facial features to make a complete graph with no crossings.

"Touché!" exclaimed Arkay, while Phoebe hummed a duet with herself. "I forgot you were a tor. The crossing number for a complete graph of five points is one when the points are on a plane or on a sphere, but of course it's zero on a torus. In fact, Hoorayri discussed crossing numbers for toroidal graphs. It's hard to believe, but if your face had seven features you could still draw a complete graph on your skin without any crossings!"

At the time this conversation took place, formulas had been found for determining the crossing numbers for complete graphs of any number of points, both on the plane and on the surface of a torus. At present, there are only conjectured formulas, and very little is known about crossing numbers on other surfaces such as the Klein bottle and the projective plane. On the plane, the crossing numbers for 6 through 10 points are known to be 3, 9, 18, 36 and 60. On the torus, for 6 through 10 points, the crossing numbers are 0, 0, 4, 9 and 23.

Now see if you can prove that on the plane the crossing number for the complete graph of five points is 1, then use that theorem to show that no map of five regions can be drawn on the plane so that each region "touches" the other four in the sense of sharing a common part of a border. An informal proof is sketched on page 83.

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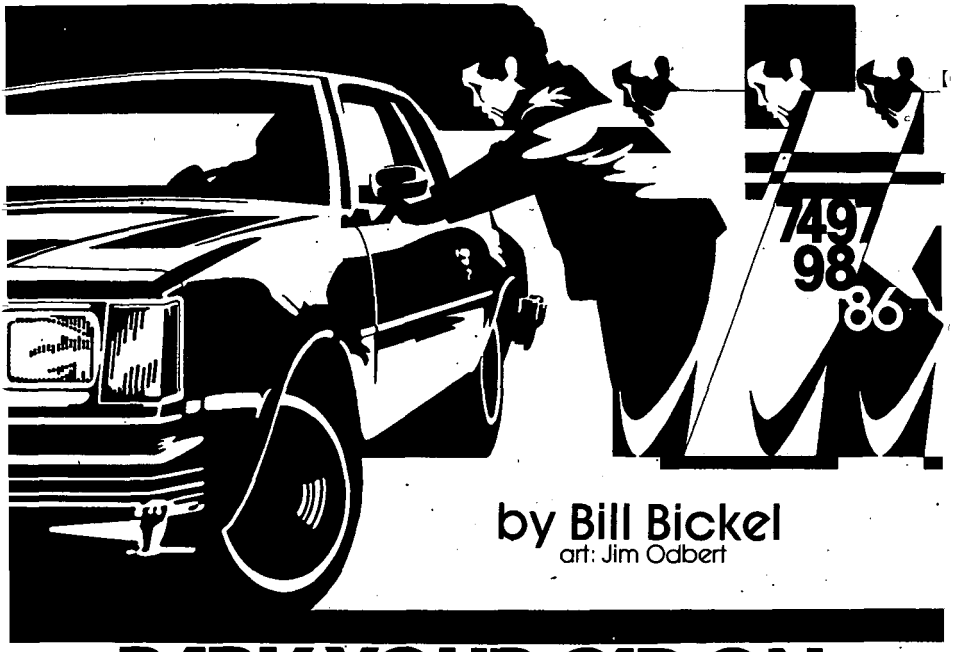

by Bill Bickel
art: Jim Odbert

PARK YOUR CAR ON BAYCHESTER ROAD TONIGHT

Mr. Bickel lives in The Bronx, New York, with his patient and understanding wife, Robin. If one doesn't count the novel that never appeared because the publisher folded, the piece *Playboy* paid for but decided not to use, and the article cut to unrecognizable shreds by a local magazine, this is his first sale.

After going up and down Bartow Avenue more times than I care to think about, I finally found a space I thought I could squeeze into. I cursed the city for forcing me to walk six blocks on a freezing winter night to reach my building, and began maneuvering my way in.

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When I finished, there was a tapping at my side window. I didn't recognize the man at first, and instinctively grabbed for the crowbar I keep under the seat. They say this is one of the city's low crime areas, but it can't hurt to be prepared.

"Yes?" I shouted through the closed window.

"You can't park here," he told me.

I looked around for his car, thinking perhaps he'd had his eye on this space himself, but I didn't see any. Competition for parking spaces on Bartow Avenue can be pretty fierce on Wednesday nights.

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Would you please open the window so we can talk, Mr. Cace? I'm not here to harm you."

I rolled down the window, and got my first good look at him. "Do I know you?"

"Not likely, Mr. Cace, but I need a favor of you. I'd like you to park your car in front of your building tonight, on Baychester Road."

Convinced I wasn't in any danger, I decided to see what he had in mind. "I'd like nothing more," I said, "but there's the matter of a $25 parking ticket for parking on Baychester on Wednesday nights. I can do without that. Of course, if you wanted to pay the—"

He passed a small yellow bar through the open window. "One pound of gold bullion," he said. "This should more than cover it. Now will you please do as I asked?"

There was a sudden, frigid gust of wind, and I made sure my parka hood was tight around my head. Then I handed the bar back to him. "No, you seem too anxious. I want some answers first."

"Nobody has ever demanded explanations before."

"You make a habit out of asking people to break traffic laws?"

Some people are born with a sense of humor, and some people manage to acquire one. The man standing outside my car merely scowled. "Very well. I haven't the time to wait for somebody else.

"My name is Mergass. My time-home is 7497." I could tell he expected me to interrupt at this point, or at least register a look of disbelief, but I've never been one to give people what they expect. "I will not describe my era, other than to say we posess every convenience and luxury technology has to offer. Having eradicated all illness, we are virtually immortal. All labor, both physical and mental, is performed by machine."

"Sounds wonderful," I said.

"You cannot imagine the boredom. We live only for new forms of recreation, but even they wear thin in time. That is a current expression, is it not?"

" 'Wear thin'? Of course."

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"Good. It took me weeks to learn all the languages and dialects I'd need for the Time Game."

"The Time Game?"

"That's what this is all about; what you've just become a part of."

"Whether I want to be or not?"

"One way or the other, yes. A mate and I—"

"We say 'friend' in this country, if you're interested."

"Thank you. My friend Selka and I have devised a game in which we carefully alter the stream of time, to cause some subtle change in our own time period. This particular round, for example, concerns itself with the location of our city's capitol building. I am trying to change history, as it were, so the capitol will have been built to the east of where it was when we left 7497, and Selka is trying to move it west. Without, of course, affecting anything else of consequence."

"You mean you can change something as minor as that by something you do over . . ." I did some quick figuring. ". . . fifty-five centuries earlier?"

"You see this?" Mergass said, taking a small machine from his pocket. "This looks like what you'd call a calculator, correct? No, please don't touch it. This button here would erase all my calculations, and I'd lose the game instantly. We'd call this, in twentieth century English, a 'streamulator.' Every time Selka makes a change in the time stream, I must detect it as soon thereafter as possible, use this device to determine the long-term effect, and locate a focal-point further along—we're only allowed to move forward once a game has begun—at which I can counter it and alter history toward my own end."

He seemed to have finished his explanation, but he still hadn't answered my question. "I can't believe my parking on Baychester tonight would change all that much."

"An action just as simple could change a great deal more. That's why Selka and I have to be so careful, and double-check every move. In your case, I've calculated that you will get a ticket if you park on Baychester, and because he wrote out that ticket, a policeman will just miss seeing a gas station being robbed a few blocks away. The criminal will avoid capture, only to be arrested for a similar crime next month.

"Because of this," Mergass continued, "the criminal will be sentenced by a different judge. The judge who would have tried him had he been arrested tonight would have given him five years. Instead, he'll get three.

"Four years and some months from now, having resumed his ca-

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reer, he will break into a private home while the occupants are away. Fearful of his vulnerability, the owner of the house will shortly thereafter purchase a handgun. About a year later, the gun will be stolen from him by a drug addict, who will eventually use it to kill his girlfriend during an argument."

I'd heard enough. "You mean she'll die just because I've parked in front of my building?"

"That's just the beginning of the chain of events, and of course that's only one chain resulting from your actions tonight, but yes: Nothing alters the time stream quite like a death. Whether a person lives or dies—any person—can't help but reverberate through the years."

"Well, I won't do it," I said, starting to roll up my window.

"Because of one woman's death? What if I told you that parking on Bartow tonight will lead to two deaths over the next few years? . . . Ah, I thought that would change your mind. You can't cheat fate, Mr. Cace, whether it be woven by God or man." He smiled very faintly, as humorless people often do when they consider something amusing. "Besides, we needn't always cause people to die in order to make our alterations. In fact my last move, late in 1923, was to stop a bullet from killing a minor politician by the name of Adolf Hitler."

"Good God," I said after a long silence. "Don't you realize that led to the deaths of tens of millions of people?" His face showed no expression. "If nothing else, I'd think that would cause more changes than your little game could possibly take into account."

"Not really," Mergass said, matter-of-factly. "In the long run, very little was altered by the fact that the Second World War began exactly when it did. Alternate futures tend to converge after major alterations, just as they diverge after minor ones, such as where you park your car. Nobody understands why, but it is so. I'll tell you what does bother me, though: After all the variables involved, all that planning and calculating on my part, do you know what Selka did next? He moved to 1952, and eliminated a French baker. Just killed him, personally and directly. Can you imagine being so crude and uninspired?"

"Shameful," I said, sarcastically. "How can he ever show his face in public again? Sounds to me, Mergass, like you're just upset that Selka pinpointed and countered your move so simply."

Mergass, suddenly angry, said nothing for a moment, then reached back into his pocket. For a fleeting moment, I thought he might withdraw a weapon, but we both knew killing me would throw off

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the Game. He pulled out the gold bar, and handed it back to me. "Listen," he said, "we've talked long enough. Will you help me, or not? I can always find somebody else."

"You told me yourself you didn't have the time," I reminded him. "Especially not now. But I'll tell you what: Let me have two of those bars, and it's a deal."

He grumbled, gave me a second bar, and watched as I started the engine and drove back to Baychester Road. When I finished parking the car right under the sign forbidding it, he was already standing nearby, making some final calculations on the machine. My guess is, he was determining whether my sudden financial windfall would have any adverse repercussions. Then, with the press of a button, he disappeared.

Crude and uninspired indeed, I said out loud as I pulled back the parka hood. It had gotten pretty warm in the car, but of course I had to keep the hood on as long as Mergass was there.

I drove back to Bartow Avenue, found a parking space, turned on the car's dome light, and was just taking out my streamulator when Mergass appeared in front of me. He just stood there, looking angry, saying nothing.

"How far did you have to go before you found out?" I asked him.

"Seven years."

"Seven years," I repeated. "So of course you can't make your next move before that point. Why did you come back? To concede the Game, or just to congratulate me for outsmarting you?"

"Deceiving me, Selka. You spoiled a great move for me."

"That's why I've won every game so far. Admit it: I'm the better player."

"Don't be so sure. I've already got my next move planned out. I just want to know how you got yourself so well integrated into the time stream at this point."

"You mean, did I somehow cheat? No. I'd streamulated that killing the baker would guarantee that your next move would come in this area, somewhen around now, give or take a couple of years. But of course I didn't know what it would be. So I came here three years ago, got myself set up with an identity, an apartment and a job, and worked my way into the time stream in such a way that I'd be your most logical focal-point. Then I just waited for you to come to me, so I could neutralize whatever you'd come up with."

"That grinning you've learned to do in this era is a very irritating habit," Mergass said sourly, pressing the *travel* button on his streamulator and disappearing without another word.

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Poor Mergass. He's angry now, but wait until he realizes that all I did so far was negate his move. I'm still entitled to make one myself.

And my streamulator just gave it to me: I'll sit here in the car for one hour, then blast the horn repeatedly for a couple of minutes. This will awaken a young couple living in the building across the street, they'll find it difficult to get back to sleep, and before the night is through, they will have conceived a child.

I can't help thinking about what Mergass said in jest earlier. He's right. We have become gods. What are gods, if not beings who control birth, death, and history?

No matter. What's important right now is whether Mergass will notice this change before he makes his move. It's unlikely, especially since he doesn't expect me to be making one. And, since he can't make another move unless I do first, I'll have virtually guaranteed that the capitol building will be built on the west side of the city. I'll enjoy the look on his face when I explain it all to him.

Okay, Rathin, I see your plan. By altering the local parking laws earlier in the century, you maneuvered the two 75th-century players into making a series of moves that will move their city's administration building to the west side; thereby changing the city's layout, resulting in a random meeting . . . clever, Rathin, but you're not dealing with primitives anymore, so confident using concepts they barely understand. You're competing against Arkal, the top player of the eighty-seventh or any other century.

I hope you enjoy your height while you have it. After my next move, which will clinch the contest, you will find yourself one of the shortest men in the metropolis. But I could have arranged worse, and after all, it was you who chose chrono-genetic manipulation as the stakes.

HAIKU FOR VOYAGER 2

Voices in your bones
forbear the measureless night
for the unlocking.

—Robert Frazier

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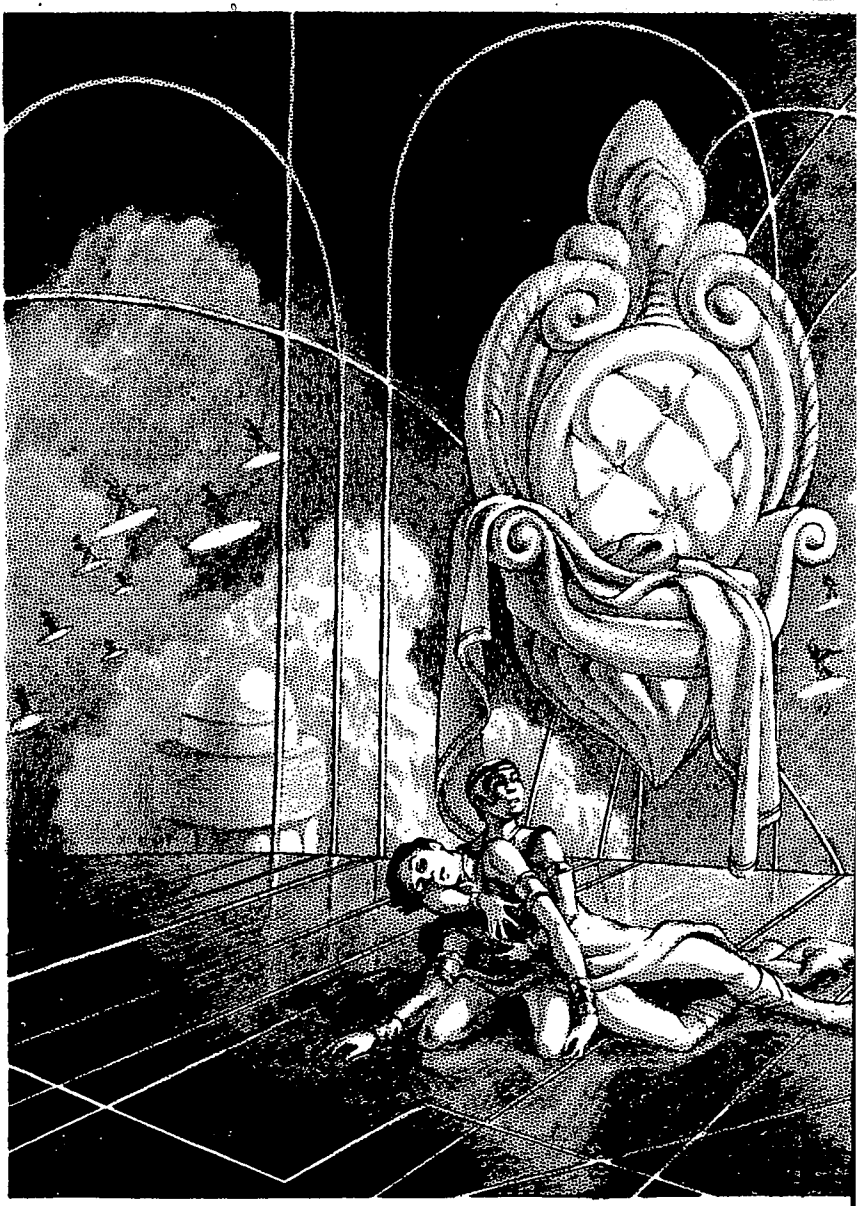

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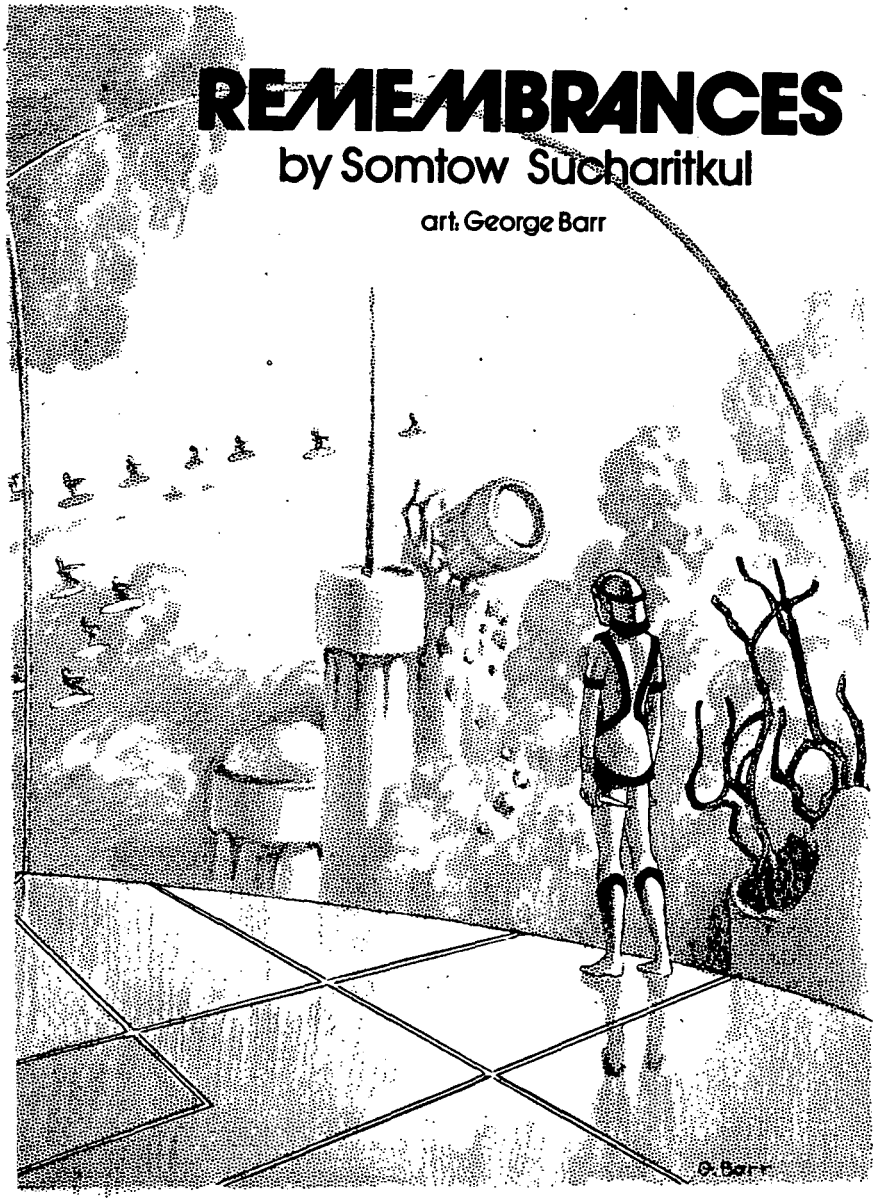
REMEMBRANCES

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: George Barr



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Mr. Sucharitkul once described his Inquestor Series as an attempt to create a universe of "incredible beauty and brutality." Certainly it has plenty of both. But when it was compared to the late Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality of Mankind Series, Mr. Sucharitkul remarked that there were some similarities in the two imaginary universes, "but his is more Oriental." *We don't understand this, putting it as Auctorial Inscrutability.*

In the huge chamber, dwarfed by their gilded hoverthrones, a boy and a girl sat quietly by themselves. The boy was utterly still, numbed. Beneath them, shrouded in shadow and ceremonial vestments, lay the corpse of their father.

The girl sprang from her throne. The boy did not move, but followed his sister with his eyes. She clapped her hands, dissolving the dark walls to reveal the dying city below. Tall walls crumbling into cindercrusts. Streams of liquid light that shattered the milky-glass clouds, so artfully crafted by a generation of cloud-sculptors—light that struck the twisted towers and the jewelled minarets and made them vanish in puffs of smoke. Fire chasing fire in the labyrinthine gardens.

There was no sound; the forceshields screened out the screams. But the boy could make out people at last, tiny dots of people . . . insects being flushed out of their nests. He forced himself to watch. Towers cracking open like ripe fruits, seed-pod-people tumbling, snapping into flame, sizzling, plummeting. . . .

Quietly, his sister was saying, "We should have gone out with the people bins. There was plenty of warning."

"Father's dead."

"If they find us here they'll separate us, assign us to different clans. The Inquest won't let us grow up together."

He leapt from his throne then, hugging the dead Princeling. The body was ice-cold, stone-hard. "I want to die," the boy said.

"Yes." Their eyes met over the body. Glint of a dagger drawn suddenly from the girl's kilt. The old traditional weapon of the city's ruling house. No painless euthanasia for a prince of the blood. He saw her smile sadly. *We're only nine years old!,* the boy was thinking. *This can't really be happening to us.* . . . They were matched twins,

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destined from birth to share throne and bed. For thousands of years the Inquest had not touched their world, had ruled it from afar . . . and now came war. What they fought over no one knew, but the planet's fate was sealed. In an orbit around one of the moons, people bins waited to collect the survivors, to time-freeze them in stasis until an unused world could be found for them; for the Inquest was compassionate, and avoided, if it could, the waste of human life.

"Quick, the dagger," he said. "Before we change our minds."

"No . . . one more look . . ." She rose and turned to the wallshields. Smoke blotted out the suns. And now, bursting through the dark-striped clouds, a tower-string of childsoldiers riding their mirror-flashing hoverdisks. Never breaking their formation, like links in a chain that hung from the sky. The children all whirling, whirling endlessly, twin lances of light bursting from their laser-irises, spinning disks of deadly light . . . buildings sawn instantly into toppling chunks! Sliced people tumbling into heaps on the streets! And the fire—

"They're coming closer! Let's get it over with!" the boy whispered, hoarse.

"But I must see this—I must never forget—"

"What for, sister? It's over. What do you mean, never forget? It's over!"

Then they hugged one another, not passionately but ceremonially, as kings do. He seized the knife from her. "I'll do it first."

The noise burst on them. The shields were broken. The knife slipped from his hands. Tendrils of smoke curled in through the dissipating shielding. And behind the smoke were dozens of the childsoldiers. They wore black war-tunics. Their eyes—their weapons—glittered crystal-gold. Their faces were hard, pitiless.

They were here. It was too late to observe tradition. "Why?" the girl was screaming. "Why did you come here? We had such a beautiful world, we harmed no one—"

An explosion drowned her crying. They clung to each other now, no longer playing their tragic roles . . . now they were just two frightened children. He squeezed his eyes tight shut, trying to wish everything into a bad dream. And then he felt gentle, old hands separating them. He opened his eyes. A shimmercloak rustled, blushed pink against deep blue. . . .

The Inquestor smiled. His sister's hand felt cold and dry, like smooth stone. He released it.

The Inquestor said—his voice was so quiet, so authoritative, "The Princeling's children. Why was I not told?"

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An underling's voice: "Lord Inquestor, we did not know—"

"No matter. I am glad we have found them, and they are alive. It would not have been compassionate, to have abandoned them here . . . ."

"Let me die!" the girl cried.

The Inquestor only smiled. At last he said, "I cannot do that. I cannot kill you without reason . . . no. I will take you with me, assign you suitable clans, let you go forth into the universe from which your world has secluded itself for so many centuries." The boy could hardly hear above the crackleroar of the burning city. "Oh, do not be afraid, Kerin and Elloran, daughter and son of Prince Taanyel. Don't try to follow your father into a foolish death. . . . The Inquest is compassionate, and will provide."

"It isn't fear that makes me cry," Kerin said. "It's anger." The Inquestor had already turned his back on them, expecting them to follow. "Loreh, Loreh," she whispered, calling her brother by his child-name, "don't ever forget what they did to us! Don't ever forget who you are! They can't make us forget! Promise me, even if we're separated by a thousand parsecs—"

Through his tears, the boy nodded. The smoke hid her from sight. Death had spurned him, and now he was all alone.

The Shendering system was unremarkable . . . there were hundreds of such backworlds in the Dispersal of Man. There was the little moon, now a sliver, but sometimes a pale peardrop, gleaming in the glitter-dark of the planet's night. The planet itself, cloud-shrouded, water-blue, its landmasses a startling green threaded with silver rivers and peppered with the fragments of the great vermilion road. The big moon, far off, pockish and jagged, where rockworms slithered, covering a millimeter a day and living off the cold light from the small yellow sun . . . it was not a world to interest the great and powerful. "But a fine world," Tash Tievar said as the learning craft of the House of Tash made another pass over Shemberas, the Singing Mountains.

Some of the younger children gasped; Tievar could not suppress his smile. Once he too had seen his homeworld from space for the first time, when he had first been named to the Clan of Tash, the Rememberers . . . but that was eighty years ago. *I remember too much,* he thought, and turned to the business at hand. . . .

"Watch the world," he said. The children were silent, clustered in a semicircle on the mirror metal of the ship's floor; all the force-shields had been deopaqued, and it seemed that they floated on a

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mirror-disk in the midst of empty space. "Now, all together, eyes closed. . . ."

Eyes closed. *Wringing remembrances from the inner darkness. The daily training of the clan of Tash* . . . "Good," said Tievar. "Now tell me what you saw."

Kerin, a highborn girl, displaced from her native world by an Inquestral war, for whom the Inquest had found a home in the Clan of Tash out of their infinite compassion, said, "Father Tievar, I remember the world hanging between the two moons, three shells on a peasant's necklace."

"Nice image. Your future master will like that."

"I don't want a master!" the girl cried out. Such an outburst was not suitable, for all that Kerin might have been a Princeling's daughter.

"Be careful," Tievar said as gently as he could. He avoided her eyes, not wishing to single her out. The girl had only been on Shendering for a few months, and already she was his favorite. He turned to watch the half-world wisped with hover-haze and wreathed with a million stars, matching it in his mind with remembrances of other worlds, other times . . . "I know you have endured much pain. The Inquestor who gave you the name of Tash knew you would have Remembering in you; because your father's suicide, the destruction of your country, your world, would be branded indelibly in your mind as a Rememberer's Remembrance is branded . . . but there are also things that a child of Tash must forget if she is to do what is ordained . . . come, I don't wish to scold you. You are doing well here." He watched the girl as she stood for a better view; she wore the plain white tunic of the clan of Tash well, as though it were a costly robe. *If only she knew how much I understand her pain,* he thought. He wished he could tell her about his love for her, how he felt for her what a father feels . . . but it would not have been right. The memory of another father still burned inside her, and he knew better than to touch such a remembrance.

Now all the children were doing their remembering exercises, and the small craft sped swiftly from the world, aimed at the greater of the two moons. *They resent this training,* Tievar thought, *because they believe they will never have to use it. But I have been Rememberer for an Inquestor once already. Only his death released me. And in all that time he called for me perhaps a dozen times. Powers of powers, what use are we really?*

"Be ready," he called out. "We'll hit a displacement field in a few minutes." Suddenly they were through; the perspective had changed

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in an instant. Now it was Shendering that was distant, a fierce crescent of blue fire behind the craggy rim of Dhaëndek, the dead moon. A collective catch of children's breath . . . "The exercises. Don't forget why we're here."

"It must be so cold there," said Kerin. He thought he felt a twinge of longing in her voice. But she was too young, surely, to long for coldness. . . .

. . . and then the last moon, Kilimindi, hardly more than a rock, but within it, hollowed out of the dead basalt, the palace of the absentee Inquestor who governed the system. The little moon's surface was made smooth by the Inquestral architects, checkered with square fields of ice to look like a *shtezhnat* board warped into a sphere. Tash Tievar compared the images with his remembrances and found them true.

But now the children were clamoring for stories; and he wanted to remind them of the high seriousness of their purpose, so he went on with the lesson in earnest.

"Your services may never be required," he said, "but if they are . . . if a time should come when, through a game of *makrugh,* this planet must be destroyed . . . they will summon us. The Inquestors do not like to destroy planets, children. Their purpose is . . . we cannot really understand it. To preserve the balance of the Dispersal of Man, to protect us from stagnation . . . but there is a House of Tash on every planet. We are all like aliens here, shunned because of what we represent. When war comes we will know first. The people of Shendering—as many as can be saved—will be packed into people bins and towed by convoys of delphinoid shipminds through the not-space between spaces, the overcosm, waiting, for centuries perhaps, for a new world to become available. But a few of us will be chosen, we who Remember. For every Inquestor who has taken part in the game of *makrugh* must acquire one of us, to remind him—in perpetuity—of the planet that he has caused to die. . . . The Inquestors value compassion above all things. That is why we exist, so that they will never forget that they must have compassion." He stopped suddenly. He had seen something that did not accord with his remembrance—

Kerin was saying, "They don't seem to have learnt very much about compassion. I saw rivers of white fire gush through the city streets—"

But Tievar was not listening. He had seen something . . . something he hoped he would never see again in his life. A serpent-string of silver cylinders. Slowly they were circling the moon, flashing briefly

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in reflected light before the darkness swallowed them . . . and streaks of delphinoid ships, darting among them like corkscrew comets. *No!* Tievar thought. *It can't be—*

A chill shook him, a dread he had only felt once before in his life.

"I think," he said, "that the lesson is over. I think we should return to the world now, to the House, get a little refreshment . . ." his voice wavered. "We will be having visitors soon—"

A babble from the children. "Visitors, Father Tievar? Who?" Tievar closed his eyes, subvocalizing instructions to the craft's little thinkhive. The craft shuddered, shifted, did a momentary stomach-wrenching gravity change. The moon was behind them now. Tievar did not want to look back, but something impelled him—

"The visitors, Father! Who are they?" It was the girl Kerin.

"Inquestors." Even without looking he felt the girl freeze. She was Remembering her past. A world in ruins. Well, she would have to forget it now. They would all have to forget a great deal before year's end. . . .

"It's time, then! And I've only just come from one war-wrecked planet, to find that I must—"

"Do not weep, Kerin. You will not have time for weeping now. We'll all have to intensify the work, have longer Remembering sessions, more field work . . . there won't be much time."

"I am not weeping!" Kerin said defiantly, and Tievar decided not to look too closely.

Instead he watched the people bins. From this distance they seemed like little silver pellets, beads perhaps, a bracelet around the moon. . . . The starships stormed like phosphorflies. It was hard to believe that each people bin could hold millions of people, stasis-frozen and stacked in racks. . . .

What did they want with this poor, insignificant planet? What crisis in the Inquestral game of makrugh *had forced the war to move to this sparsely peopled quadrant of the Dispersal?* Tievar watched the children. Many were silent, wondering about the future. Some were chattering with excitement. Perhaps they would be chosen! Perhaps they would live in an Inquestor's court!

"Father Tievar . . ." It was the voice of the girl Kerin.

"Yes?" She had drawn him away from the crowd of children.

"If you are chosen by the Inquest, will you go, Father Tievar?"

"I'm too old."

"So if they choose me, I'll never see you again?"

"Never. Because I will not go out again. I have been a Rememberer too long. The memories confuse me now, and I long for . . ." he did

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not want to say death, not aloud; it would frighten the child.

"I know what you mean, Father. I too have wanted to die. To crawl away to a place as cold and dead as the emptiness I've carried inside since Father's death. . . ." The girl frightened him sometimes. She was so intense, her past still burned inside her. She had not yet learnt that there are things a Rememberer must forget. And then the girl said, "I will never leave you."

He was moved, that she had touched him with her love. But he had nothing to say, no comfort, no platitudes of wisdom. So he turned to watch the people bins and said nothing.

With a flick of his mind, Ton Elloran n'Taanyel Tath dissolved his tachyon bubble and stepped out onto the surface of the doomed world. With him came Sajit, his musician, and a music of tinkle-topped sighs from strings of song-jewels that hung about their necks; for Elloran could go nowhere without music; he found the silence too painful. There were too many memories to be found in silence. Utopias destroyed. Planets in ruins. And . . . when he thought too deeply . . . a memory of a small boy, waiting to die, in a dark huge dreadful silence.

It was a forest clearing. In the grass, a few meters of vermilion road, garish against the grass-green; a displacement plate. For the only city on Shendering was Jen, the Scrambled City, a city shredded into minuscule jigsaw fragments and scattered all over the land-masses, linked by a single scarlet road and by a million displacement plates, the buildings artfully concealed underground, under quilts of jungle overhang, under umbrella-cliffs and ocean-floors . . . whoever designed the city had not wanted to inflict man's presence upon the planet's wildernesses. In Jen, you dared not leave the road unguided for an instant, or you would never find it again.

Now it was deepest night, and the only light was the soft blushing of Elloran's shimmercloak, a pale pink shifting across the deep blue shimmerfur. Another step and it was a brilliant, flower-fragrant night with two moons shining, a pocked moon and a haloed one. A step later, bright daylight, mist-blue hills; another step, twilight and a brook bridging the red road, winding around boulder croppings . . . and always the landscape peppered with white rosellas, the most prosaic of all flowers. For a moment Elloran felt a sea-breeze, breathed a sharp tangy smell, and then—

The road forked. Flicking an image of the city's layout into his mind, Elloran saw where to turn and what instructions to subvocalize into the next displacement plate. Cliffs loomed, blurred into

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meadows, meadows shimmerfaded into orchards doused in the bitter fragrance of ripe krangfruit.

"Are we there yet?" Shen Sajit, the musician, said. "I mean the House of Tash. Although why you choose to come here yourself—"

In the pause, a rush of shimmerviol music. "I had to. Sajit, I had a reason to lose this game of *makrugh*. This planet has something I've been looking for, for fifty years. . . ."

"For this you're letting it get destroyed?"

Elloran didn't answer. He was thinking of Kerin. How old would she be now? He tried to calculate what effect time dilation would have had on her. Inquestors lived long lives, travelled mostly by instantaneous tachyon bubble, while the common people could only achieve the effect of longevity through the accidents of relativity. . . . She must seem younger, he decided. An image of the burning homeworld came into his mind for a moment, but he cast it away. It was so long ago, and he had lived through so much. . . . *I am an Inquestor now,* he told himself sternly. *My compassion extends equally to all men.* It was different for other humans, even ones, like Sajit, who might have been friends if Elloran had not been an Inquestor. For a few seconds Elloran debated whether or not he should tell his musician of the real purpose of their journey to Shendering. How he had searched the colossal mind of the thinkhive on Uran s'Varek until he had found his sister at last. They walked faster; a river flicked into view, a veldt speckled with rosellas, a half-house growing from a sheared-off rockface. *Kerin . . .*

The road branched; displacement plates glinted in the thick grass. Elloran selected a turn. Abruptly they were in the House of Tash. A central atrium with a kaleidotinted roofshield, the light-colors dartshifting through whispertrickling fountains, sending pastel ripples across monochrome holosculptures of ancient heroes . . . a cool place, subtle and restrained. He could hardly hear the songjewels' music above the burbling water.

An old man in the white tunic of the Rememberers came to greet them. "Ton Elloran," he said gravely, "I am Tash Tievár, senior instructor here. You will give audience in this atrium?"

Elloran nodded. A hoverthrone of faded wicker materialized on the displacement plate at his feet. He ascended. "I suppose you know why we are here. The representatives of the Inquest, I mean."

"Who could fail to do so, my Lord?" Was there bitterness in the old man's voice? *Powers of powers, I'm not responsible for the way our universe is!,* he wanted to say. *I didn't choose to be where I am now. . . .*

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"Know then," he said formally, "that war has come to this sector of the Dispersal of Man, and that in all probability the Shendering system will fall beyond . . . that in its compassion the Inquest has prepared people bins to receive such of this world's inhabitants who wish to avoid the possible annihilation of the world . . . and that I as spokesman of the High Inquest do solemnly invoke the charter of the Clan of Tash, to choose a rememberer for myself." This last he spoke in the high speech, according to formula.

"What selection process shall you require for the people bins?"

"Whatever selection plan was chosen when the world was first chartered."

"By choice, then, with those possessing clan-names having the right of first choice."

"Very well." *What a tired, pointless ritual it seems!* Too many times Elloran had spoken these words and consigned faceless millions to their deaths. *But it is necessary!* Man was a fallen being. To be static was to court a thousand heresies, worst of all the heresy of utopianism. War was necessary! It was the deepest of human instincts! At least, now, war was controlled by the Inquest; war was compassionate, striking only when it must. But to be an Inquestor was to court the most terrible of all lonelinesses. Elloran wondered if this old man understood the pain of it, the terrible war between guilt and compassion that every Inquestor strove to conceal deep inside himself.

Tash Tievar stood silent, waiting for another command. "The Rememberers. I must have Rememberers, Tievar. Twelve Inquestors took part in this game of *makrugh,* and none must ever forget . . ." When was the last time he had summoned a Rememberer? A decade? *Next season, when I return to the palace . . .*

"Pick whom you will, Lord Inquestor."

"Let lots be drawn, or use some other fair method. It doesn't matter to me. Except . . . " he tried to keep his voice steady. "Except for myself. For myself I wish to requisition the girl named Tash Kerin."

Why had the old man turned so pale? "What's the matter?" Elloran said.

"My Lord—she is so new here, so untrained—I did not know that you Inquestors knew so much about us, knew our very names and the planets on which we were stationed—"

"Fetch her." There. It was done. The old man stepped onto a displacement plate and was gone into the next room. Perhaps the next room was on the other side of the planet; Elloran did not know how fine the scrambling of the city was.

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He commanded Sajit to call forth an eerie music from the song-jewels, like the call of ancient cetaceans in the ocean of mythical Earth. It whined above the trickling of the iridescing waters. And suddenly she was there—

She didn't speak. *She's so young—*

"Kerin."

"Lord Inquestor?" Elloran saw a slip of a child, her blond hair cropped unbecomingly like a peasant's, her eyes wide, dark, fierce. She did not avoid his gaze the way commonfolk should. He was proud of her for this, for not forgetting who she had been.

"Kerin—you're so young, still—it must have been only yesterday for you, the childsoldiers ravaging the city, the burning world, keeping deathwatch over our father—"

And suddenly she knew. She shrank back from him. "You've become one of them! Loreh, you promised never to forget!"

"Kerin—" He reached out, wanting to touch her, and it was as if she was in the past still, a ghost, taunting him, his fingers slipping through her . . . but it was only that she had darted behind one of the fountains. It gushed from the ceiling, defying gravity by means of a Shtoman varigrav device, cloaking her with spray-mist. "I know this is hard for you to accept, Kerin. I had no choice. They named me to the clan of Ton. They said that my past suffering would enable me to feel compassion. I had no choice!"

"You wanted to die! You grabbed the dagger from me, you were so eager!" Her voice was a shrill shriek, lost in the echoing rush of waters. She did not look at him now. She backed into the shadow of a huge holosculpt tableau, her face criss-crossed by shadow-horns of a mythical beast, her white tunic burning amber-mauve-emerald in the light from the skyroof's kaleidolon.

"You don't know how I've looked for you."

"I don't care! You've killed our father all over again, you traitor—"

"I have a golden palace now. Its name is Varezhdur. The palace flies from star to star. I am a Kingling with a dozen worlds. I have worn the shimmercloak of the Inquest for fifty years, and all this time I have searched for you, and all this time your starship sailed the overcosm, with a half-century squashed by relativity into a single year . . . I have told no one, not even Sajit whom I trust more than any man. . . . For you I played *makrugh,* to get you back I picked this planet to die—"

"You don't look sixty years old."

"We never need to age. You can share this too, you can share all of it—"

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"You're an Inquestor. You can make me do anything. If you requisition my services as Rememberer I have no choice."

"I will not force you, Kerin." It had all been for nothing! Elloran clapped his hands for louder music, hoping to deaden his grief. Percussion thundered and thudded. "Isn't there any way we can start again?"

She came towards him then, disrupting the fountain and sending the spray flying. She was saying, "There is an old man here, a teacher, Tash Tievar . . . he has been like a father to me. I have promised to stay with him always. To stay here, and perhaps be killed, if need be . . . I've been prepared to die ever since our world died at the hands of the Inquest. I will go wherever he goes."

"Then I will requisition him too. There's no problem there."

"You say you would not force one of us?" She laughed then, an angry, desperate laugh that he had never heard from her in all their childhood. She had changed so much. Again Elloran had the uncanny sensation that she was only an illusion, a shadow-revenant from the coffined past.

"No," he said, "I will not force one of you. Compassion is our way, not compulsion."

"Tash Tievar will not leave, Ton Elloran," said Kerin. "And so I will not leave; my honor binds me, and the Inquest, I know, understands honor well."

He stood speechless for a moment. In coming here, in revealing his emotions so nakedly, he had violated everything the Inquest had taught him. How could the Dispersal of Man be held together if even Inquestors ignored the trappings of degree, broke caste, pleaded with underlings? He wanted to be a brother, not a Kingling dealing with a subject, but . . . for him it had been fifty years. He had expected gratitude, not resistance. Not that Kerin would play *makrugh* against him—and win! He had forgotten how alike they were.

"'At least—at least—I'm your brother, Kerin—"

"I have no brother," Kerin said softly, bitterly. "My brother was killed by the Inquestors last year, the year they devastated my homeworld." And she walked back through the fountain, vanished from the displacement plate. From the songjewels around his neck came a burst of martial music, inanely cheerful.

There was still time, some days at least, before the war would come to Shendering. Tievar thought it was best to continue as he had always done. Today he led the children away from the road a little. They stood in an open field flecked with wild rosellas. The

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children clustered around him, wildflowers themselves, he was thinking. "Close your eyes now. Perceive the fragrances. Separate all the scents until you can enumerate them all, every blade of grass, every flower. . . ."

He took Kerin aside then. "You did wrong, little daughter, to mock the Inquestor, to link your fate with mine."

"I can't help it, Father!" And then she told him everything that had passed between her and Elloran. "How can I go to him now, knowing that he's callously killed this world to get me back?"

Tievar touched the girl's cropped hair for a moment. He did not know what to think. He was disturbed, that an Inquestor would move a world to fulfill his own emotional needs. Inquestors were supposed to be beyond such things. *And she is so like him,* he thought, *in her own way, dragging me as a pawn into her conflict with him* . . . he left her abruptly, turning his mind to the Remembering exercises. He had the children singing monotonous, mind-stilling chants now, lulling all the senses except for the sense of smell and the touch of the breeze.

Then, without warning, a different music came—

Harsh resonanceless highwoods shrieking through waves of shimmerviol and whisperlyre like exotic fish skip-skimming the waves. It was Ton Elloran and his friend, the silent musician.

"My Lord—"

"Go on, Tash Tievar. It is not our intention to interrupt your little lessons." Uneasily, Tash Tievar muttered a few more instructions. The apprentices were too rigid, too wound up by the Inquestor's presence, to be able to concentrate on Remembering. Pointedly Kerin took up a position as far away from the Inquestor as possible, squeezed her eyes tight shut, feeling nothing but the wind and the fragrance.

Elloran did not seem to notice Kerin. *Of course,* Tievar thought, *he would not go so far as to show his emotions to us, the shortlived.* Instead, the Inquestor chose to ask questions about the planet, and about Remembering.

"The city," said Tievar, "is practically a myth to most of the world's inhabitants. Who would notice a patch of vermilion in the middle of a hundred or more square klomets of countryside? And the city is well scrambled . . . at times the road even touches the surface of the moon Dhaëndek, where miners try to trap the rockworms for their crystalline stomach linings . . ." Tievar saw that Kerin was listening to every word, despite seeming to concentrate on her exercises. He went on, "Remembering is hard for most people. There

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are so many things that men would rather forget. But Rememberers are like the rosella flowers, Inquestor, which are so hardy they can subsist anywhere." He stooped, plucked one; it was a tiny thing with a thousand prickly-stiff petaloids. He crushed it; it was pulverized into a million spores, and he blew them into the breeze. "Each one seems so fragile, doesn't it? Yet it's been said they would bloom even on Dhaëndek, living off the sunlight and drawing sustenance from the rocks, toughening themselves against the almost zero cold. Memories will come, no matter how we fear them . . . like the spores of the rosella, clinging to your shimmercloaks, even to the hulls of delphinoids as they breach the overcosm, until they find new fields to bloom in . . . and in a day they are dead. But did you not see, as you came along this branch of the road, which alternates winter and summer with every step, that there wasn't a landscape without a few of them? Even the mountainpeaks glassed in with cold?"

"You are a born Rememberer," Elloran said. "A true artist. You make the humblest things sound beautiful . . . if only you would come with us."

"Inquestor . . . Your sister has told me everything." He noticed Kerin pricking up her ears. But he had to say this! "Perhaps you were not a good Inquestor—"

He saw Elloran stiffen. "Please." He tried to stay unruffled, even though such forwardness might mean instant death. "But I see now that you are human, underneath it all. Because of this, and because of the way Kerin has linked her fate with mine . . . I have decided not to stay on Shendering and die . . . I love the girl, Lord Inquestor, and I won't see her throw herself away in a needless gesture. I am old and my life would have been useless but for this."

"Thank you," said the Inquestor. Not a word more; it would have been unseemly for him to express fulsome gratitude, Tievar knew. They turned to find Kerin—

"No!" she was screaming. "First my brother and now my second father—you've both betrayed me!—I don't want any part of this miserable universe of yours!" The children's chanting wound down to a pathetic murmur. Tievar saw Elloran's face, ashen, appalled. There was a second of stasis, and then—

Kerin was sprinting for the displacement plate, trampling across the meadow towards the taller grass that concealed the vermilion road, now her head was bobbing up and down in the wavy green—

She was gone. A cry escaped Elloran's lips. *I pity him,* Tievar thought, and the thought was strange . . . how could you pity a man who had calmly arranged for the destruction of your whole world?

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"Quick! We must follow her—if she leaves the crimson path, there's no way we'll find her again—" he said.

They ran for the plate. The Inquestor and the musician and the old man. The children following in a huddle.

Touching the path—

Nightfall. A branch in the road. The girl's shape, shadowslim, flitting to the left.

Snow. Rainbows bridging the mountainpeaks.

Summer. Beach. Autumn. Dead leaves freckled with rosellas.

Darkness. Jungle. Twilight. Taiga. And then—

"We've lost her." Sajit the musician was speaking. They had run perhaps only a hundred meters down the road.

"Powers of powers!" cried Elloran. "Fifty years I've searched for her . . ."

Tievar was breathing heavily. He was too old for this. Through his exhaustion he heard them talking—

"Her gene-pattern. Must be in the planetary thinkhive. They'll monitor all over the planet, surely they'll trace her. . . ."

Elloran. "No, Sajit. This world has no such amenities."

"We could use troops. We have enough extra ships crammed with childsoldiers."

"The war is due soon. It's hopeless."

"Inquestor—" Tievar spoke up. The two turned on him, waiting. "I am a Rememberer. Perhaps I may speak more freely than most. I know this world well—it is my duty—and I have known the girl these past few months as well as though she were my own daughter. Perhaps I can trace her. Let me try to find her, Ton Elloran. Give me a few days, set a deadline before you rain the fire-death on this world."

"Yes. Yes."

"Three sleeps then," said Sajit, taking his master's arm. Elloran said nothing; but he nodded once.

And Tievar said, "But—and I say this as Rememberer—you must realize that though you are Inquestor you are only a man. Man is a fallen being, is he not? Perhaps you will learn from this, that you cannot always get want you want, even though you burn down the moons from the sky." *Powers! I don't mean to mock him. . . .*

"You ignorant idiot!" the musician cried in a sudden passion. "Do you think he doesn't know this already? Do you think he isn't burning from the pain inside himself, from which he can never escape? Do you think the clan of Ton is for sadists and mass-murderers?" Elloran still said nothing, but waved him to be silent.

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The Inquestor and his musician stepped towards the displacement plate. In a second, Tievar and the children were in silence, for the music of songjewels was gone. Tievar and his apprentices stepped in a different direction. A blizzard, bitter-cold, assailed them. "Remember this cold!" he shouted over the howling wind. "Remember it all your lives!" He closed his mind to the cold, trying to think of Kerin and where she was likely to have gone.

Thousands of parsecs away, a golden palace danced against the stars as it orbited a rich world. There were wings and corridors and arches and towers and klomet-long comet-tail-streamers of beaten gold. And in the palace's heart, a throneroom. And in the throneroom, swirling slowly in an artificial lightfield, a galaxy made of dust. A dust-sculpture. It was the most private of Ton Elloran's thronerooms.

The tachyon bubble materialized, dissolved. Elloran and Sajit were alone together in the vast hall.

"I've failed!" Elloran cried. "Sajit, more music—"

"Wait." Elloran allowed himself to be helped into his huge throne, with its firefur cushions stuffed with kyllap leaves, with its wide steps of sculpt-friezed gold. He stared at the dust nebula. Years ago both he and Sajit had loved a dust-sculptress, but she had rejected both of them, loving the dust more. This galaxy of dust was their only remembrance of her. This old love, and many shared experiences, had forged an uneasy bond between the musician and the Inquestor, although one could hardly speak of friendship between two men so unequal. . . . Elloran wished, sometimes, that they could have been close friends, that he could have told everything long ago. But it was not in the nature of things.

Sajit said, "Why did you try to do it this way? Why the game of *makrugh?* Couldn't you just have sent a tachyon bubble for her and be done with it?"

"I've forgotten so much," Elloran said. "What it is to be a normal human, in utter terror and awe of the Inquest . . . it's been so long! I played *makrugh* because it is what I'm used to, because to be devious has become second nature to me . . . I thought she'd be impressed! That I had done all this for her! And now I've killed her!"

"Perhaps not. In three sleeps—" But Elloran would not answer.

With a wave of his hand and perhaps a subvocalized command, Sajit summoned a soft music of shimmerviols, the sweet voices of neuter children weaving and twining long wordless melodies. "Drown me in it!" Elloran whispered.

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Sajit had come up with him to the throne. Even with his friend so near, Elloran felt terribly alone. "You should have told me," Sajit said. Elloran looked at his face, more aged than his own that had been frozen in an ageless youth. Inquestors did not talk about their past, about the time before donning the shimmercloak. It was so deeply ingrained . . . an Inquestor must seem to have sprung from nowhere, like a god . . . couldn't Sajit understand? He could not rush in and acknowledge the girl to be his sister before a whole planet. Such knowledge of an Inquestor's humanity could hurt the Inquest—

"Sajit, the Rememberers. All of them. Now. Order them awakened. Here, at once."

"Elloran—"

"Obey, curse you!"

Presently they came. It had been night in the palace of Varezh-dur—night and day fell at the Inquestor's whim—and they were half-asleep, dazed at being admitted into the Inquestor's secret place. There were a hundred of them or more: old men and women, children, people in their prime, all with their white tunics hastily pulled on and their hair dishevelled and their faces streaked with sleepiness.

"Remind me!" said Elloran.

They began. They talked of a triple world, of a gas giant glowering in the sky through the silhouettes of tower-tall trees. Of a hot world with cool bubble-houses shadowed by smouldering sulphur-clefts. Of water worlds where the humans built dark slimy houses in the bellies of sea-serpents. Of beautiful worlds, shimmering blue-green or russet or amethyst in the void. . . .

"Remind me! Remind me!" Elloran screamed.

. . . of old men playing *shtezhnat* by the sea. Of children with forcenets in the mountains, straining to catch the leaping flamefish from volcanic lakes. Of a young thief slipping into the shadows, clutching the cut-off credit-thumbs of a dead merchant. Of bands of women hunting for snow-phoenixes among the glaciers. . . .

And Sajit was whispering to him, "Why torture yourself more? Make it stop," and Elloran could see the pain in the musician's face, but he couldn't stop—

. . . of last days. Of crisp-burnt birds raining onto the fields. Of fire flushing corpses from the catacombs. Of childsoldiers whirling blazing death from their hoverdisks—

"Stop!" Silence fell. Elloran remembered at last, that memory he had tried to forget for fifty years. He did not weep; he was too drained. The people of the clan of Tash stood uncertainly, waiting for a new command.

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"How long have I been listening?" he asked Sajit weakly.

"More than a sleep, Inquestor." Sajit was always careful to speak formally when they were not alone, and Elloran was grateful for that. "They must be tired, Lord Inquestor."

"Yes. Dismiss them." It seemed that he only blinked once, and they were gone. *Phantoms,* he thought. *The past returning to haunt us—by our own command . . . it takes a certain masochism to be an Inquestor. . . .*

"I'll rest now," he said when he was alone with Sajit. "Command a soothing music for me. And after, after . . . we will return to Shendering to see the end."

"Do you have to torment yourself so?"

"I have no choices. I have relinquished all my freedoms. I am an Inquestor."

At dawn Tash Tievar rose and followed the vermilion pathway out to the field where he had last spoken to Kerin. The wind was gusting sharp, making the grass dance, churning up the dead rosellas. Even as his mind raced, trying to think where Kerin might have gone, he was drinking in the wind and the whispering meadow, fashioning a future Remembrance. . . .

He squatted on the grass, alone. At the House of Tash, the chosen ones were being readied; the rejected ones were already leaving en masse for the packaging houses to be prepared for the long journey in people bins. He closed his eyes, making his mind blank, an empty message disk, as a Rememberer must when he is preparing to summon up a vivid Remembrance. . . .

Kerin—

She had come to the House of Tash a girl on fire, yet speaking always of the bleak and cold. A memory surfaced like a sea-mammal hungry for air—

I too have wanted to die. To crawl away to a place as cold and dead as the emptiness I've carried inside since Father's death. . . .

He saw her as she said those words. In the learning craft, looking out into space. And then he saw—

Dhaëndek, a dead rock whose shadow fell over Shendering, dead craters made glitter-faceted by borrowed light. *It must be very cold there.* The twinge of longing in the voice.

Tievar opened his eyes. At the zenith Dhaëndek shone still, a moon-ghost softened by sunlight, half-hidden in amber dawnlight. The wind made a miniature hurricane of husked rosellas, freckling his hair and shoulders.

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It has been said that they would bloom even on Dhaëndek—

He roused himself. There were places when the crimson road went through caverns or underground chambers. There were places when you suddenly felt a stomach-twisting lightness for a moment, almost as though . . . they said that the pathway touched the moon, but only Rememberers, well-trained and cautious ones at that, would leave the pathway for the treacherous places beyond . . . Kerin was a good Rememberer. He had trained her well. She would have noticed.

Quickly his mind traced over the thousand branches of the road. The city's maps showed only what the city would look like if it were not scrambled; so long as you stuck to the road, you would not need to know the road's locations in true space. He would have to go by memory, by following the twists and turns in his mind until he recalled the queasy-making stretches of the road. . . .

Resolutely he turned now, stepping onto the displacement plate, subvocalizing instructions to its mechanism.

The light gravity hit him at once, and the chemical-rich odor of the air. The road—only three or four meters of it—was in total darkness; only the displacement plates at either end glinted. No walker along the road would have bothered to notice such an anomaly; it would have been dark, one would have pressed onward to one's destination. After a few minutes, when his stomach had stopped groaning, he left the road, bumped into a wall, groped his way along it for a while, found a door that accordioned open when he touched the stud. . . .

A village square. Overhead, a roof of rock. Houses hewn from the living stone of Dhaëndek. A few people, dressed in rags, wandering about.

"Please could you tell me—" A woman saw him. She pointed. Screamed. Made some gesture to ward off evil. The square emptied abruptly. Tievar walked on. It must be a village of those who hunted the rockworms on the surface. The hostility he understood. The clan of Tash was evil-omened. No one wanted to see one now, when news of the world's end must surely have reached even Dhaëndek.

Mocking laughter. Tievar whirled round—

A woman was watching him. She was middle-aged, swathed in a shapeless smock, grinning. "Cowards, the lot of them," the woman said. Her voice was raucous, grating on the nerves. "I know you're looking for the girl."

He started. "You've seen her?"

"Perhaps. A miner sees a lot, they say. You have to, to catch the

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worms before they notice you and lash you to smithereens."

"Where is she?"

"What's a cityman like you coming asking questions of us countryfolk that don't even know how to get to the city? I tell you, I'm not superstitious. I don't believe you whitecoats herald the end of the world. What would anyone want with Shendering, for powers' sake? Take the girl—"

"The girl! Quick! You'll be well paid."

"Keep your credit. I suppose you'll tell me to sign up for a people bin next. It's all a ruse, I say, to oppress us simple people. The girl . . . she stood here for a sleep, two sleeps, and everyone shunned her. Except me. Don't believe those stupid stories, I tell you. The chatter of hermaphrodites. I'm a miner with a clan name and I didn't earn it listening to nonsense."

"The girl!" Tievar said desperately.

"I took her where she wanted to go. Out in the middle of nowhere, past the last of the wormhordes. She was crazy, said it was time for her to die. Well, that's her business, and I only did her a favor."

"Take me there!"

"If the worms don't get us first." She laughed uproariously, thinking the prospect very funny.

The woman's name was Beren of the clan of Var. She led him down empty streets—Tievar got the feeling that they had only just become empty at his approach—and to a little rock-hollowed house where she threw him a pressure-skin and slipped herself into one herself. It was an organic, semi-sentient device that hugged his body, constricting but invisible save for the air-supply in its belt. A hoverplatform outfitted with strange gear waited on a displacement plate. Beren sprang up, beckoned him to follow, without waiting subvoked the command and they were on the surface—

Barren. Bleak. Craters within craters. Jagged mountains, a menacingly near horizon, and half-Shendering and distant Kilimindi shining dimly, casting soft twin-peaked shadows. And the silence. Tievar had never known such silence, even at the most profound levels of Remembrance-concentration.

They sped over the pocked, gravelly terrain. Now and then the floater mechanism kicked up a dust-flurry and the dust-motes took a long time falling. "Are there many rockworms here?" he subvocalized, hoping the skin had a conversing device.

"Ha!" a thin whisper in his ear. "We mine them . . . mostly they just sit and photosynthesize, but if they sense danger they'll lash out once with their tails and . . ." Another laugh, converted by sub-

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voking into a strange cough-grating sound. "If we get them right we spray them with liquid water," she tapped some of the strange apparatus on the floater, "and this freezes instantly and keeps them still long enough for us to slit their stomachs and gather the carbon crystals, *huge* ones the size of a baby's head—"

"Carbon crystals?"

"Diamonds. They come somewhere in the middle of their digestive chain—"

Tievar let the woman chatter on. Her mouth never moved, as his did by accident whenever he talked; he was not used to subvocalizing whole conversations. The tinny buzz of her speech continued; and he listened, because if he did not he would think of finding Kerin's corpse, lying frozen in a crater. He was terrified to think of it. And then—

A sliver of white, running out of a crater-wall's shadow—

"Kerin!" he cried out, forgetting the airlessness. There was no sound. But she must have picked up the subvocalization on her pressure-skin. She twisted around, saw the floater, ran—

The floater skidded over a stray rock, righted itself, Tievar propped himself against a railing, they raced towards her, he subvoked her name over and over, and then—

"Where is she?"

"In a shadow somewhere," the woman said. "Shall we go back? Her air supply will run out soon anyway."

"Kerin!"

And then, in his ear, a quiet voice. "It's no use, Father Tievar. I made a pact with my brother, and I'm going to fulfill it even if he never does, even though he has gone over to the other side. It's no use, no use . . ." He thought she was sobbing. "I'm going to do something beautiful first, though. In a few seconds I'm going to dissolve my pressure-skin. Didn't you once say that the rosella might bloom even here, in the coldest land? Yet the people who live here wouldn't think of testing out such a theory. But a million spores are clinging to my body, to my clothes. I give them to this dead world, a gift from my dead heart."

He saw her darting out of the shadow—

"No!" he screamed, his voice helpless in the big silence. "She's going towards that glacier," he subvoked to Beren.

"That's no glacier! There's no glaciers on the surface, you ignorant cityman—that's a—"

A rockworm was slithering down a craterwall. It was like a crystal tunnel with a thousand icy segments. It was a hundred meters long

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or more. And Kerin was running straight towards it.

And the floater was off! Rising with a suddenness that toppled Tievar onto the platform, racing towards the rockworm. And then Tievar saw the creature's innards through its transparent exterior, quivering, shivering constructs of tubes and globules like an ancient chemist's laboratory, and the octahedral diamonds, fist-huge, rolling slowly around . . . *"Kerin!"* he tried to shout. How could she not notice—

A scream, transmuted by the skin's device into a strangled whistle—

The tail, coiled on the other side of the crater wall, whipped out. Kerin sailed upwards—

"Quick! Do something!" But Beren had already commanded the floater. It sprang up, swerved to avoid the backlash; Tievar saw Kerin falling, slowly, slowly in the moon's low gravity, and then—

The monster reared up, glittering, he saw crystal plates rippling slowly, the inner organs pulsating crazily—

"If she's already opened her pressure skin," Beren said quickly, *"open yours.* Seize her, tight, hold her to your opening. The skin may adjust to hold you both—"

They soared! Tievar felt a stab of terror as they crashed the creature, prying loose a shower of crystalrock, and then swung away to avoid—

Curve of the crystal tail, then—

A hundred nozzles, spraying mist over the creature! Making it shudder to a standstill, crusting the crystal surface with fine ice—

Kerin, crashing onto the speeding floater. "All in a day's work," said the miner. But Kerin—

"Something's wrong with her!" Tievar clasped her to himself. The skin was undone. At once he dissolved the skin that was hugging his chest, clutching the girl to him. Her eyes were stiff and open as if in death. The cold of vacuum seared him for a moment, and then the skin grew taut around them both. He felt cool blood wetting his chest. She had only been exposed to the vacuum for a few seconds, but a little while longer and . . . "Kerin . . ."

She did not speak. The floater came to rest a few centimeters above ground, and Var Beren was already seizing the opportunity to slice open the immobilized rockworm. The vibrosaw was efficient, spewing crystal guts and diamonds all over the stony ground. And Kerin was stirring. . . .

"Why are you punishing me?" clasped together in the same pressure skin, they could speak to each other now.

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"You were punishing yourself, Kerin. Sometimes we see people only as what they represent. Your brother was a symbol of those who had dispossessed you, who had driven your father to suicide. But *he* did not do those things, Kerin. It is Dispersal of Man itself, the order of things, that causes such things to happen. . . ."

"I don't believe it," Kerin whispered. "I can't accept that things *must* be as they are. I want to fight them, I want to destroy them—"

"Understand yourself," said Tievar. "You think you ran away because you were angry—at me, at Elloran. But you can't punish the universe by killing yourself. That's a child's way. And you are fast becoming a woman, Kerin. This is the only universe we will ever have. You have made a beautiful gesture worthy of a Remembrer, but now you must understand why you tried to destroy yourself. . . . It's because you were angry at *you,* not *us*. Because, with all your hatred of the Inquest, you could not burn away your love for your brother." She did not answer him, but he knew that it was true. He held the girl tightly, shielding her. And then she pointed towards the dead rockworm, to where Beren was approaching with a forcenet stuffed with diamonds that she would never be able to sell now, she pointed feverishly until he saw what she wanted him to see—

In a cleft between two rocks, some meters away, a rosella was budding. They wasted no time, those hardy little blooms, adapting to anything. Tievar smiled sadly, storing the Remembrance; but Kerin's face held no expression at all.

Kilimindi. The stronghold of Ton Karakaël, absentee Kingling of Shendering and a score of other systems.

A huge arena-hall, a disk englobed by forceshields that let in the starlight. Its floor appeared to be dark blue grass; in fact it was carpeted with the living fur of shimmercloaks, and now and then it would blush pale pink against the ultramarine. A dozen Inquestors and their guests had gathered here. There were fluttering shimmercloaks, there were three-tiered headdresses topped with still-living featherskins cloned from peacocks and calliopteryxes, nude hermaphrodites with kohl-blackened eyes and nipples rouged with paste of powdered rubies.

Elloran had not wanted to come to this grand display; but his absence would have been unseemly. And the music of Sajit had been demanded; he could not, in all propriety, have failed to oblige, since it would have been commented on if he had shown rancor at losing a game of *makrugh.*

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It seemed a very artistic notion—to organize the disposal of the people bins into a grand fireworks with music. After all, once the planet's millions were in their temporal stasis, nothing could affect them at all—why not use them to make pretty effects? They would never know of the indignity they had suffered, when they awakened a century or two from then, on a new and perhaps hostile world.

Elloran looked over the familiar scene. He didn't want to play this game any more.

A thought touched him. *One day the Inquest will fall . . .* he flicked it aside. He dived into the throng, making trivial conversations, feeling the awful aloneness that all Inquestors feel.

Sajit's music began: a sennet of a thousand brasses, relayed from an auditorium in the palace of Kilimindi. The room they were in began to move away from the moon; the conversation was stilled for a split second, and then continued as though nothing had happened.

And then Elloran saw the people bins. Their tops funnelled in readiness.

"Number one," the announcer said. "Exploding flowers."

A swath of light played over the blackness. And suddenly it was full of people! Time-frozen in foetal position, scattering like dust-motes in a wind . . . the people bins swooped now, scooping them up like chaff, making swift swerving passes by the arena so the Inquestors could have a better view—

"It's beautiful, so beautiful, is it not?" said a young woman in a shimmercloak. He knew her to be Ton Zherinda, newly elevated to the Inquest. He nodded abstractedly. It *was* beautiful—and he needed beautiful things around him now, so that he might forget that he had murdered his sister, his birth-matched bride—

"Number two: phosphorflies over the mountains of Jerrelahf. . . ."

The light-swath darkened now. A new explosion of frozen people, this time each one coated with glowstuff, so they were like human meteors pelting the darkness, and now the people bins extended klomet-wide nets and swooped down to catch them as they flitted by. Thunderous applause now; everyone chattering wildly, wanting to know the name of the artist so that he could be engaged for the next game of *makrugh.*

The Inquestrix, hardly a woman yet, still stood by him. Perhaps she was not yet at her ease among these jaded people.

"Vultures," he said. "Vultures!"

"What do you mean, Lord Elloran? Are you insulting these people as a means to begin a new round of *makrugh?"*

"No! I—"

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And they were clustering around him now. "No!" he said. "I don't want to play now—"

"Brilliant!" an old man was saying. The Inquestors circled round, ignoring the fireworks now, while the rest still watched them in awe. "To begin a game by protesting a lack of desire to play—"

He was trapped. He looked for a way to escape. *There must be a way to break the circle—*

And then the announcer said, "A craft is approaching. The display will begin again shortly. A craft of the House of Tash is approaching."

Inquestors muttered among themselves; the guests grumbled, complaining about the interruption. In a few moments they were materializing on the displacement plates. Each one was in a fresh white tunic. Each one found the Inquestor to whom he had been assigned and went directly to him. Suddenly there was silence. And, in whispers that were meant to be heard only by their masters, each Rememberer began to tell the story of Shendering. Outside, little towcraft whisked by, gathering the stray frozen people that the big bins had missed: for the fireworks were an aesthetic event, not a murdering one.

Elloran waited. Already the mood of jaded exhilaration was gone. Some of the Inquestors had gone off to far parts of the room with their Rememberers, brooding, moved. It was in these ways that the Inquest tried to discourage the pride that came with awesome power, the hubris of almost-godhood.

And then there was Tash Tievar. . . .

Elloran ran to the displacement plate, ignoring all seemliness. When Tievar stepped off the plate, *she* was there.

She came to him. She began to whisper in his ear as the others were doing, but he waved her silent.

They turned to watch as the people bins drifted away. Behind them was half-Shendering, heartbreakingly lovely, doomed.

"Don't say anything, sister," said Elloran softly. "The Dispersal of Man is a brutal universe, and if we believe in it completely we will be crushed, like insects, like rats, like star systems . . . but we are humans, and they cannot crush us completely, they cannot crush love. . . ." He did not dare touch her.

She was the ghost that had haunted him these fifty years. Now the two sides of his life were one, master and victim, and he could no longer tell which was which.

At last he remembered the past without pain.

She did not smile. Instead she reached into her tunic and handed

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him something.

A rosella.

He stared at it for a long time. Then he cupped his hands and crushed it and blew the spores out into the chamber. He thought he saw her eyes laugh a little.

Then he said, "Full circle. Again we keep deathwatch together." And he hugged her hard to him, bursting with bitterness and joy.

LEGENDS

Across sand dunes as white as powdered snow
Old shadows creep and phantom breezes blow.
Remembered dragons are refashioned by
The silhouettes of trees along the sky.

Above these thrashing, dark and bony tails
The cloud-borne ship of bold Diana sails,
While petaled rose and gold, the sinking sun
Emblazoned there, is hunter's trophy won.

But now, this boat—this double-pointed horn,
This lover's lantern—children yet unborn
Will know as but another travelled world,
Where under plastic skies their flag unfurled.

And men from Earth will seek adventure there
In shuttles seeding rain and warmer air,
Revive a dead world in a strange cocoon
And grow some hanging gardens on the moon!

—Nancy Tucker Wilson

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REFLECTING ON SATURN

On a warm midsummer's night
I set up my reflecting telescope and aimed it toward Saturn
  which only moments before had risen.
Excited by the clear night I took an extra long time,
  as I stumbled and fumbled around,
to sight the planet with the viewfinder
and gather its light onto the parabolic mirror.

Focusing it finely,
I was nearly knocked out with the first dizzying glance
  of Saturn's astounding radiance.
The shimmering ringed spectacle reminded me
  of the flickering fireflies
which were hovering about the surrounding bushes.

Not content to catch merely a glimpse of this splendid sight,
I determined in a frenzied flight of the imagination
  to catch the planet itself
and observe it close at hand!

For this purpose I fabricated a lightweight net
  out of a coathanger and a piece of cheesecloth
and set about to execute my scheme.
Knowing it would be attracted by a light source
I flicked on my pocket penlight to entice it
  up from the parabolic mirror
upon which it was so gracefully alighting.

Just as it began to fly off,
  with a quick swish of the net I snared it,
and immediately transferred it with the greatest of care
into a widemouth mayonnaise jar with a perforated lid
which I had prepared for this purpose.

Have you ever seen a planet close-up?

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A breath-taking wealth of detail was unveiled
including its vast system of over one-hundred lacelike
luminescent rings, subrings, and ringlets
  some of which were eccentic,
and in at least one case, braided!
I could also discern when it settled down
  and stopped flapping its rings,
a spoke-like radial structure and other unusual markings.

However as the night wore on,
I noticed the planet's glimmer was growing dimmer.
Perplexed, confused and saddened
  by its fading and flickering light,
I concluded that it was losing much of its strength
because I had captured it and confined it
  to an unnatural environment.
Saturn had been free to flit about the solar system
for the better part of five billion years!

Having meant it no harm
I decided to release the planet and let it fly free
  before it was too late.
I opened the jar and, following a brief hesitation,
  it took wing and flew away,
readily regaining much of its earlier resplendence.

After a few moments it was lost forever among the fireflies.

—**Peter Payack**

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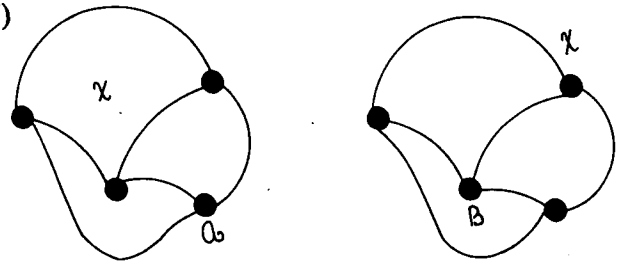
SECOND SOLUTION TO CROSSING NUMBERS ON PHOEBE

(from page 47)



Any complete graph for four points must divide the plane into three mutually bordering regions as shown above. A fifth point, indicated by X, must go either inside a region, as shown on the left, or outside all three as shown on the right. If it is inside, there clearly is no way it can be joined to point A without crossing a line. If it is outside, it can not be joined to point B without crossing a line.

To prove that no map with five mutually "touching" regions can be drawn, assume that such a map is possible. We could then put a point within each region, and connect every pair of points without any crossings of lines. We simply draw each line so it passes over the border shared by the two regions that contain the line's two ends. This would complete a graph of five points with a crossing number of zero. Because we proved this impossible, our original map assumption must be false.

Unfortunately, this does *not* prove the famous four-color map theorem, since it is conceivable that a map of many regions could require five colors even though the map has no spot where five regions mutually touch. The two theorems are often confused. I confused them myself many years ago when I wrote a science fiction story called "The Island of Five Colors." (It is reprinted in Clifton Fadiman's anthology, *Fantasia Mathematica.*) Readers frequently send me what they believe to be simple proofs of the four-color theorem, but which actually are no more than the old graph-theory argument outlined above.

The literature on crossing numbers is growing rapidly. For an introduction to the topic, consult my *Scientific American* column for June 1973. The most complete reference is *Crossing Numbers of Graphs,* the Ph.D. thesis of Roger B. Eggleton, at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 1973, where he worked under Richard K. Guy, a world expert on the topic.

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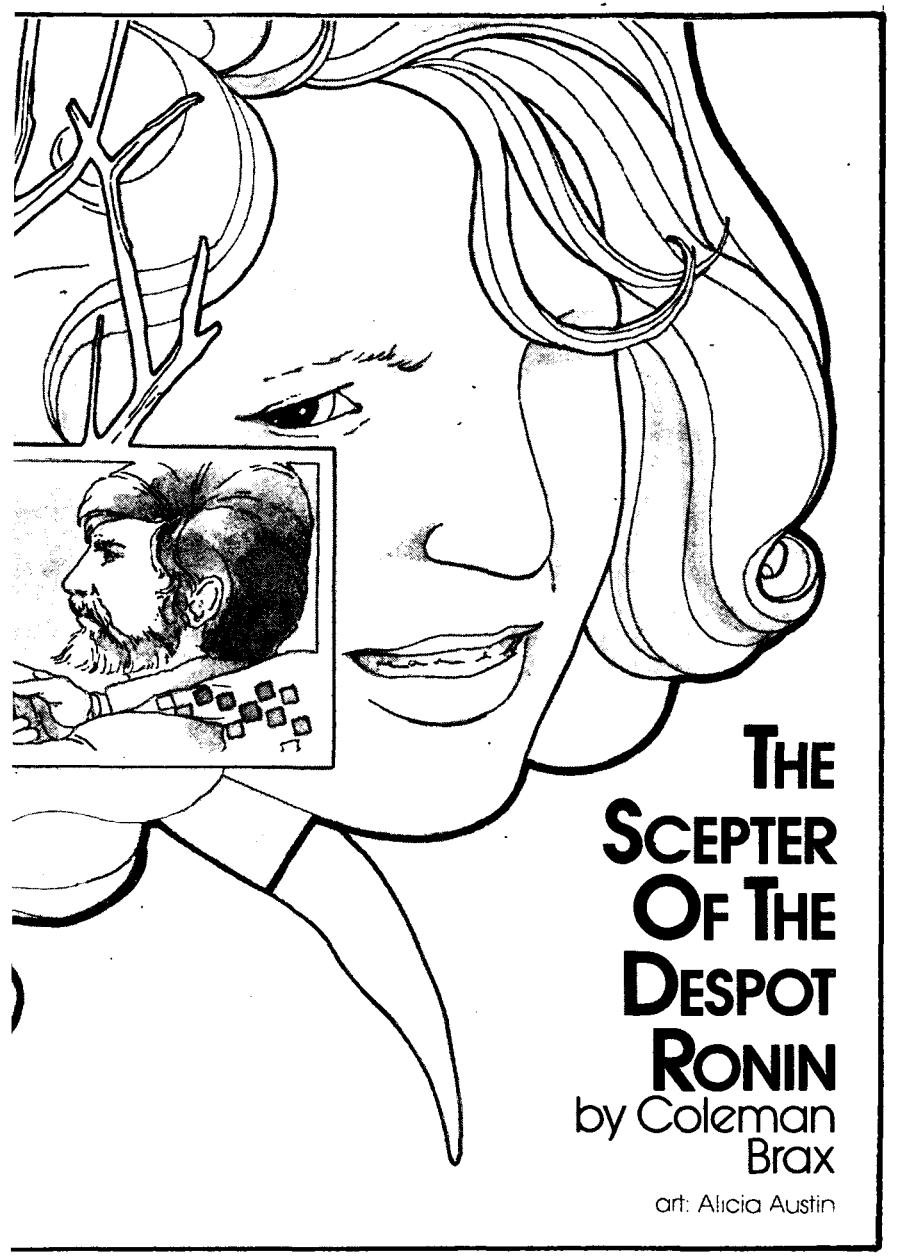

THE SCEPTER OF THE DESPOT RONIN

by Coleman Brax

art: Alicia Austin

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Coleman Brax previously appeared here with "The Man in the Rover" (July 1980), and has been published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. *He recently settled in San Jose, California, after spending the first 37 years of his life on the East Coast. He is an applied mathematician by profession and he spends his spare time hiking, bicycling, and writing.*

The gentleman who guards the Scepter has a tendency to ramble. One tries not to linger at his niche, but sometimes the children hold back and the old fellow's head straightens up. Perhaps the museum has been quiet of late, and he is eager for an audience no matter how small it may be.

"Sunharra wore a wooden cloak," he begins softly, "and her pale-yellow hair drifted behind her as she walked . . ."

"What is a wooden cloak?" the children inevitably ask. The Scepter's keeper smiles. The visitor resigns herself . . . or himself to hearing one more version of the old tale.

"A wooden cloak is just what you might expect it to be," the guard explains. "It is formed of tiny pieces all fitted together so that the whole hangs comfortably about the body . . .

The cloak that Sunharra wore she had made for herself. She had spent a full day oiling the joints, and they flexed quietly as she stepped from the dusty street into the cool stone passageway. A breeze blew back her long hair as she approached the open doorway at the far end of the corridor. After two days of travel, she had reached the Mistress's workroom.

The round wooden plugs all had been pulled from the far wall so that daylight could brighten the great stone floor. Sunharra stopped at the edge of the room. She was not sure she had the courage to enter it. The room was at least five times the area of her own modest workroom. Scattered about the floor lay chunks of rare wood, pieces not yet completed. She stretched a pale hand towards the nearest; the dark surface was coarse to her touch. The Mistress had certainly not put her best effort into that one, she thought.

The wooden cloak tapped at her ankles as Sunharra took a few steps towards the room's center. The handbasket she had brought

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with her brushed against a waist-high section of ivory treetrunk. *Such extravagance*, she thought, as she glanced about at the valuable pieces that littered the workroom floor. *I must use what I receive from one work to finance the materials for the next. But here . . .*

She walked forward again with the slow gait and upright carriage she had learned so painfully from her village's schoolmistress. She peered across the lights and darks of the room, scanned the shadowy walls until she saw the Sculptress seated in a distant corner.

Wrapped in folds of black netcloth, the Mistress sat staring at a large branch of ivorywood. The young woman said nothing for several moments as the Mistress remained preoccupied. To sit in contemplation was not Sunharra's way of working, but she had still much to learn. In the silence of the room, she barely allowed herself to breathe.

"Set down your basket," came the deep voice.

The wicker carrier containing her friendship offering dropped from her trembling fingers, came to rest by her sharp-toed boots. The purple grapes spilled over, but she dared not bend to replace them.

"I will take no apprentice," the Mistress continued. "You are wasting your time here."

"I seek no apprenticeship, Mistress." Sunharra's voice rose and fell uncontrollably. "I am a sculptress of the second rank, newly won. Perhaps I am not so youthful as I seem."

The Mistress turned, and Sunharra saw the jutting jaw and downswept nose of the aged face. The Mistress's eyes seemed bright as those of a young woman. "Then you are after the Despot's prize, you fool. There is no other reason you would come to me."

"But I have worked grenwood. Or sub-gren I should say. A small piece. I have turned it to my will." Sunharra bent to take a pouch out of the basket, and removed from it a folded white handkerchief. Carefully, she opened the fine cloth to reveal a ring the size of her thumbnail. She had worked for weeks to produce this piece. Day after day she had wrestled with the wood until she learned to shape it to a form harmonious with the inner fibers. The ring was richly grained in reds and browns; engraved on its surface, almost too small to discern, was a picture of a sapling sprouting from a fallen treetrunk.

"You must come to me," said the Mistress. "I no longer have the use of my legs."

The young woman skirted the unfinished blocks, crossed the room until her boots nearly touched the fallen folds of netcloth. Now she

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could sense the size of the person hidden beneath the fabric. The Mistress was easily twice Sunharra's thickness in every visible part of her body. The old one reached out a spotted hand.

The Mistress squinted, brought the band close to her eyes. She turned it around several times before pronouncing her opinion. "You have found the heart of this material. But this is sub-gren as you have said. When I was your age I could have done this three times a day and laughed when I was done. You have proved nothing about your abilities with gren."

"This is my one opportunity . . ."

"To become the Despot's sculptress? Perhaps it will not be your only chance. The last one's tenure was unpleasantly brief."

Sunharra took back the ring, slipped it onto her slimmest finger. Its feel was that of polished stone. "There was an accident," she said in a falling voice.

"An accident? The Despot *arranges* accidents. Why don't you go home and wait until you reach the first rank of your art, then return to me and I'll talk to you about the gren."

Sunharra was pleased with the way the light fell on her handsome ring. If only her fingers would steady, she thought, she would feel the confidence that her words expressed: "I am ready, Mistress."

"Ready?" The woman turned and spat onto the floor beside her. "You are ready to make fine implements for a noblewoman's table, perhaps. You are not ready for gren."

Sunharra retreated to the other side of the barkless branch that lay before the Sculptress. In its natural form, the piece resembled a man's muscled arm. "What are your plans for this fine chunk of ivorywood?"

"It is to be for the Viceroy's table. He is an avid hunter of birds and requires a platter on which to serve his catches."

"For the Viceroy . . ." The elements of the cloak clattered against the stone as Sunharra knelt behind the branch. She had worked ivorywood many times. Surely she could show the Mistress an indication of her talent. Surely her gifts would not fail her. "May I?"

"As you wish." The Sculptress nodded in the direction of the branch.

The young woman seized the wood with two hands, felt its firmness, its whiteness, its potential forms. It was here that she must prove herself, in this supple branch. The wood was cool; it flexed slightly as her energy flowed into it. Almost at once she met resistance. *You have will,* the fibers seemed to say, *but I have strength. Do not attempt to change me.*

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I am mistress of wood, Sunharra thought in the language the fibers understood.

You are weak, the branch replied. But already its shape was being altered. She felt her power quicken; she imagined the ends of the branch softening, and indeed the branch began to contract. At her command, the middle bulged, the ends pulled in further.

You will tire, the ivory said. Sunharra paid no heed. She worked past the resistance, smoothed the surfaces. Soon she had shaped the whole into a perfect disk.

Now she was ready for the real confrontation with the fibers. With a sudden exertion, she pushed herself inside the piece. The chill of ivorywood surrounded her; she entered a cold, white mist.

The fog carried hints of images as it swirled about her; these gave suggestions as to what designs the wood might readily take. Quickly she tried her sculptress's fingers; she reached for a tall, ill-defined structure. What might she make of it?

The shape loomed larger. With her ghostly fingers, she tried to shorten it to a manageable piece. The form slid past unaltered. She reached for it again, but the mist would not yield to her wishes. *A treetrunk is what you want,* she thought, as she reached once more for the shape. This time she accepted its general form. She worked her fingers delicately along the exterior. Bits of chilling fog sheared away under her touch; the ridged bark of a trunk began to develop.

She moved slowly up the tree, defining the bark's whorls and striations, until she came to a white cloud at the peak. *Here will be the crown,* she thought, as she began to cut away the mist to reveal a thicket of branches.

The grain continued to accept her alterations. *I must press on,* she thought. From the remainder of the cloud, she shaped a bristly nest to sit atop the tree; above the nest she placed a bird of enormous wingspan. Three squirming snakes dangled from the bird's beak, while three young birds in the nest stretched their necks to reach the food.

A few details and I am done, she thought, as tear-shaped leaves formed along the branches. The bird hovered over the nest; Sunharra drifted towards it, came under the shadow of its wings. *Now I am part of this . . .*

She became the bird. She felt the cool air under her wings as she tightened her beak around the wriggling reptiles. Below her, the feathers on the nestlings' throats fluttered in the breeze. Her offspring's cries grew strident as she lowered the food to their waiting mouths.

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The moment solidified as the nestlings began to feed. The work was done; it was time to depart. Sunharra withdrew, watched the nest dwindle until the coolness of the ivorywood gave way to the relative warmth of the Mistress's workroom. Before her on the floor lay the glistening platter, its surface carved with the scene she had lived.

"You are quick," said the Mistress grudgingly. "I could not have done that in less than a day. . . . And the form is elegant. You show great promise. . . ."

"Then let me try my talents on your block of grenwood!"

The Mistress raised her palm. "You are too eager to declare victory. Do you not see your error, sculptress-of-the-second-rank?"

Sunharra did not need to look at her work. Its feel was etched into her body. "No."

"The *nest*, girl. Don't you see? The Viceroy will not care to be reminded at the dining table that his arrows have orphaned many young ones."

"But . . ." Sunharra felt her confidence faltering. "I could not fight the grain. This was the scene that the wood wanted."

"Perhaps. But if ivory is strong then gren is twice as strong. And a scepter for the Despot does not come easily from any wood. Think about that. On your way home to your village, ponder that fact and be grateful that I refused you."

Sunharra did not depart, but knelt once more to the platter. She gripped the disk and found its form rigid and cold. *You must yield*, she thought, as the fibers sluggishly gave way to her. *I must change the scene.* She poured through into the platter, entered once again the white mist.

She encountered a docile grain. Tamed once, the fibers now responded to her will. She worked at first with imagined fingers, but soon could produce an image merely by conceiving its final form.

Sunharra merged with the scene. She was the bird, and this time beneath her there was neither nest, nor young ones, nor forest, but only vast fields. She bore herself forward on her great wings; she was distant from her home.

Below her in the fields stood many men armed with bows of ivorywood. They were clad in ivory armor and the tips of their white helmets spiraled upwards like twisted horns of animals. From the archers came a volley of arrows in such numbers that she could not dodge them. She beat the air with her wings, but the arrows were thick in every direction.

I must leave this image intact, she thought. *I must hold this mo-*

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ment. The missiles came slowly, but her wingbeats carried her even more slowly. She saw the death arrow coming; it was aimed perfectly at her heart. *To remain so forever,* she thought. *To remain at the moment of impact.* As the arrow pierced her flesh, Sunharra pulled herself free of the scene.

"Your work was satisfactory," said the Mistress. A shawled head hung close to Sunharra's face. The young woman lay on a mattress of unmatched softness. From what she could see, the bed was large enough for a dozen sleepers.

"The platter is finished; the Viceroy will accept it. Had it been mine, less anguish would have shown in the bird's expression, but the Viceroy is not a subtle man." The Mistress spoke from a sedan chair that had been set at the side of the bed. "You will require a day to recover from such a work."

"And then?" Where the arrow had struck Sunharra, there was still pain. Whether this was real or imagined she could not say.

The Mistress lowered her eyelids but did not reply.

"I will try the grenwood," Sunharra said. "That is what you have come to tell me."

"Yes . . ." The Mistress's tone was grave.

After another nap, Sunharra awoke to find herself alone. She slid from the bed to try her legs. They carried her shakily to the outside wall of the room. *What time of day was it?* She pulled out a round window-plug and glanced into the street below. From the shadows, she judged it to be late afternoon.

Two of the Despot's soldiers in squashed hats and ill-tailored breeches were strolling casually towards the south end of the town. A boy raced past them, tried to dodge a hand that shot out to clutch at his grey shirt. Sunharra winced, recognizing at once the close resemblance of the boy to the older of her two brothers. Soldiers were everywhere; such an incident might repeat itself in her own town.

The dialog that ensued was inaudible. The boy squirmed, kicked, tried to bite the soldier who held him. The other slapped him about the head. Soon the confrontation ended; the three began to walk towards the barracks. *Another recruit for the long marches,* Sunharra thought sadly. *Each year the Despot must extend his rule.*

She turned back to the room. The headboard that covered much of the adjacent wall was in the shape of intertwined vines whose leaves bore human features. The work was an ode to harmony, undoubtedly created when the Mistress was at her prime. After a few

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years in such a bed, Sunharra thought, the Despot would bring home his soldiers and embrace the enemies he'd made. Ah, if only the new sculptress, whoever she turned out to be, would understand the changes she might bring about. . . .

The selection of the new sculptress depended on the creation of a new scepter. No scepter had ever been fashioned from gren; that was the task Sunharra had set herself to perform. She could not rest while the grenwood lay formless in the Mistress's storehouse.

Still clad in her simple nightshirt, Sunharra entered a windowless and unlit stairway. Her fingers followed the rough lines of mortar as she slid her sandaled feet from one step down to the next, at last reaching the ground floor. An odor of roasted grain filled the house. She had not eaten since early morning; her tongue wet her lips. But where was the Mistress? Where was the gren?

"Not until you have dined!" boomed a voice from behind her, echoing through the passageway. It was the Mistress's voice. Sunharra turned and tried to find its source. "Not until you have dined!"

She stumbled into a room two stories high that was panelled with what she took to be the work of a lifetime. Thousands of small friezes, row upon row, covered the walls. For all she could guess, they portrayed the entire history of the world, future as well as past. Mistress sat at the head of a simple rectangular table.

"You will eat what I eat, what wooden teeth can chew." The Mistress grinned, and in the light of the circle of a dozen candles Sunharra saw the perfect ivorywood teeth that lined her mouth. A bowl of coarse gruel was set before the young woman by a black-garbed servant.

"I have but one piece of the gren," the Mistress said between mouthfuls. "It is still in the original shape. How it was cleaved from its source I cannot say; my own strength was never sufficient to set a mark on it."

"That is the piece that I have come to work." The hot gruel settled into Sunharra's stomach. She finished quickly, and was so eager to be done that she allowed the wooden spoon to clatter onto the table.

The Mistress looked at her crossly. "You will finish one more bowl. I do not know when you shall eat again."

At last, however, the Mistress's servants brought in the sedan chair and lifted her weighty form into its seat. The chair, Sunharra noted, with its appearance of lightness and its unquestioned strength, was another of the Mistress's creations. The young sculptress felt a rising despair as she glanced from the sedan chair to the friezes. If the producer of these works had been unable to mold gren,

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then what chance would *she* have?

Nonetheless, she followed the back of a grunting servant as he struggled along the lamplit corridor. They arrived, not at the big workroom, but at a small room that contained only a tattered piece of floorcloth and a log that was two paces long.

"There is your adversary," said the Mistress, as the palanquin landed on the floor with an echoing clap. "It is older than my ten-times-grandmother."

Sunharra knelt to the worn cloth and examined the russet log. At last she had gained the privilege of confronting this most precious of woods. Her palms felt moist as she extended her hands towards the piece. She touched one finger to its coarse surface, felt hot pin-pricks of pain. *One does not stroke raw gren*, she reminded herself as her hand jumped back. *Nor does one delay.*

She grasped the log with two hands firmly, forgot the sensation of burning. The wood seemed to writhe in her grip, and glow with a fierce inner flame. She recalled the old maxim: As ivorywood is cold, just so is grenwood hot. *I am mistress of wood,* she told the fibers. *You are destined to grace the Despot's throne.*

The wood heaved and trembled. The sculptress pushed; the grain resisted. Between gren and ivory there was more than just a difference in temperature. No easy entrance was offered here. She searched for a way in while the bark singed her palms. Every effort she made was blocked.

"Now you understand what you must conquer," said the Mistress. "Now you know why I urged you home."

Sunharra wrapped her painful hands in the fabric of her nightshirt. She remembered the sub-gren she had wrestled with for so long, the sub-gren whose secrets she had finally mastered. This piece was larger, firmer. But the principles of her craft might still prevail.

She unwound the fabric from her hands, grasped the log again, pushed with a strength she did not know possible. The heat came up her palms to her wrists, climbed up along both arms until two ribbons of fire merged at the base of her neck. She entered the steamy swirl of the red and brown and yellow grain. All around her moved suggestions of shapes.

She looked for the Despot within the forms the mist provided. Here came a suggestive image—one that might become a horse-and-rider. She tried to bring out the details, sought the Despot's features in the vague face of her rider. The grain did not respond to her will; the features that emerged were not the ones that every schoolchild knew. Even her attempts to carve the battle armor were rebuffed.

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What stood at last was a naked warrior armed only with a grenwood lance.

I will choose my own form, the fibers seemed to be telling her. *You are merely my instrument.*

This instrument has its own will, she answered, as she abandoned her first attempt and searched for a new starting point. *I am stronger than you believe.*

She reached into the brown haze for another potential horse-and-rider. She focused her power on its form. When the wood resisted one change, she tried another at a different place, then returned later to attempt the previous step again. Back-and-forth she shuttled over the piece, each time bringing it a bit closer to her desired shape. The horse became, after some time, the great roan that was the Despot's favorite steed. Its mane was braided in the regal pattern of three and five. And on its back she created the Despot, clad in his twin-layered wooden armor. His helmet twisted upward to a spiraled point; beneath the visor, his lips were dark and thick.

The figures grew larger. The horse's flanks seemed to pass through her. *I have control*, Sunharra thought as she merged with the Despot, became one with his consciousness.

The roan pranced grandly as it bore him towards the gates of his castle. Jointed banners clattered against stone battlements as the wind swept over the towers. Pungent smoke from the kitchens wafted across the road as he approached the spiked gates.

To each side of the road, courtiers lay prostrate, their chins in the mud. They held upright the square plaques of their offices so that he could take note of their attendance. Slowly his gaze passed from one figure to the next as the details on the plaques formed—a virgin forest on one, a fallen woodcutter on another. He frowned for a moment, unable to connect these symbols with particular officials of his service.

And what was that sound of braying that came from behind him? A challenger? Surely no one would question the sovereignty of the Despot Ronin. And yet, when he turned to seek the source of the noise he saw a dark-faced rider. The attacker was so arrogant as to be utterly without armor.

The challenger leveled a lance at the Despot's chest. He fumbled for his own weapon, but found none. Where was his lance? His armorer had deceived him! A harebrained commoner had taken from him his hard-won realm. Thoughts of his ruined family, of his humiliated subjects, tore at his brain. He sought to flee, jabbed his wooden spurs into the roan's belly. They drew no response. The

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challenger's lance sped closer, struck. The Despot heard his helmet shatter as his head smashed into the mire and dung of the road. . . .

The Mistress was dabbing Sunharra's face with a cold cloth when the young woman opened her eyes. She was still in the studio, the palanquin beside her. Sunharra turned to the grenwood and saw that indeed she had changed its form. The bark had opened in places to reveal the deep reds of the heartwood. The piece was now twisted and ugly, but it had been altered. "I lost hold," she said with a feeling of shame. "I could not firm the scene, and then . . ."

"You will try again tomorrow," said the Mistress. "You have been all night at the task."

"It seemed but a moment." Sunharra's chest ached from the blow of the lance. "There is a stubbornness in this log."

"The resistance may be in your own soul," the Mistress chided.

"I will have no more to do with mounted figures. I must produce a court scene, a moment of triumph, to decorate my scepter."

"Tomorrow . . ."

Sunharra felt her strength returning. She raised herself back to the kneeling position. "One more attempt," she insisted. Before the Mistress could stop her, she grasped the distorted log. Again the wood writhed in her grasp; it flickered and burned, but she found her way to its interior.

I have learned your ways, she thought, as she worked past the obstacles. She began to produce a standing figure. Working where she could, reshaping what the mist did not hold, she sculpted the Despot's image. She shaped the high collar of his shirt, the fluted sleeves, the ridges of his wooden chestplate. Closer she drew, until again she merged with the ruler's thoughts.

The Despot was indoors. The setting, at first hazy, seemed to clarify at every step he took. He strode to the front of his Assembly Room and mounted the circular dais. The two officers in front of him pounded their sticks against the stone floor as the Despot turned to face his subjects. The ministers were arranged in a procession of pairs; each functionary held before him a medallion carved with the Despot's image. The ministers stepped forward gracefully, two-by-two, and deposited the tokens of fealty at the ruler's feet.

When they had rearranged themselves along the sides of the Assembly Room, the Despot spoke. "We bring news of triumph," he said. "We have established peace on our southern frontier, which now extends two days' ride farther than it did at our last report."

He smiled as he contemplated the new forests that would be his

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to strip. The branches would furnish crossbows, arrows, stakes. The trunks would fill his warehouses with logs. The ministers, all clad in robes the color of grenwood, raised wooden clackers to celebrate the victory. Other courtiers joined them in the merrymaking. At each glance he saw more of his admirers shaking the noisemakers above their heads.

Suddenly he saw the officer at his right hand turn his staff to deflect an unwanted petitioner. The officer at his left was similarly distracted by an out-of-place courtier. All at once the Despot realized that he was unprotected, and that his Interior Minister was approaching him with a drawn dagger.

After the recent triumphs, how could his former supporter turn against him? The Despot felt helpless in face of such disloyalty. The dagger was as sharp as wooden daggers can be. It opened his throat slowly; he heard the Minister grunting with his exertions. The Despot tried to speak, but only hisses sounded from his ruined windpipe. Then came a crescendo of groaning from the courtiers as the steamy blood cascaded down his chest.

"Sunharra . . ." came the Mistress's voice.

"I have failed." She lay in the immense bed and stared at the log ceiling. "The piece of gren is ruined."

"Not ruined," said the Mistress. "Battered, yes. Still workable for one who has the strength."

"I do not."

"There is a disharmony. I saw the gren take on remarkable shapes, but it could not hold them. You were fighting against yourself as well as against the wood."

"I must glorify the Despot . . . and yet I must be true to my own feelings. Such a feat requires skills I do not have."

The Mistress put a finger to her lips. "Do not speak treason in this house. You started with the obvious . . . and you erred. The Despot has qualities that only the gifted can see. Use your talents."

Sunharra closed her eyes. The mattress beneath her was deep; she floated in a lake of feathers. The Despot's public countenance, the one on the well-known medallions, drifted through her imagination. That proud and grim profile was not his true face; she had seen him once in a procession.

While a girl, she had stood at the roadway's edge and let the processional carriages spatter her with mud. As the Royal Carriage passed, the Despot happened to glance from its window and straight at Sunharra. Evidently, he had been involved in a disagreement

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with someone inside the carriage. His face was drawn with fury, but as his gaze crossed Sunharra's she saw a momentary softening of its harshness.

It was that incident, she realized as she lay in the Mistress's bed, that had nurtured her current ambitions. She had thought often of the Despot's eyes. . . .

"I will try once more, Mistress," she said. "I fear for the value of the gren when I am done with it."

She dressed herself fully before approaching the room. The wooden cloak settled softly to the floorcloth as she knelt above the branch. When she first entered the wood, she made no hasty changes. The steamy grain swirled about her, not yet resisting because she was not yet forcing her design. The form that hinted at the Despot's face remained outside her—an object to be observed. Gradually she shaped its details, but the whole remained fluid; it passed through stages, starting from the countenance she had seen in the procession long before. As the face aged, she drew closer to it until at last, in its final phase, she was again the Despot.

He sat on a carved throne in the center of a hewn-log amphitheatre, and looked up at the rows of his gathered subjects. They lifted banners and cheered him until he raised his arms for silence. At the topmost row of the amphitheatre sat a woman with pale yellow hair. Why was he staring at this person? The Despot was curious, but did not press himself on the matter.

The entertainment began. A troupe of jesters began to juggle until the sky above the performers was obscured by flying balls and clubs. Then came a procession of trained horses bearing on their backs carved images of earlier Despots. Finally the mock duel was fought between the Soldier of the North and the Soldier of the East. As the two actors simultaneously clattered to the ground, the Despot felt relieved that the show was ended. He was growing tired; it would soon be time for his afternoon nap.

He tried to focus on the task he had just completed, the culmination of the last days of his reign. This was, after all, the purpose of the spectacle. Beside him on a pedestal sat a large book bound in carved grenwood. The crowd was totally silent as he began to speak. "We have occupied ourselves ten years," he said in a cracked voice, "in the perfection of this book of laws." He took up the book; his stiff fingers responded slowly to his wish to open the volume. "We will read the preamble, which sets forth the principles of justice that we have discovered and implemented. . . ."

The subjects put their noisemakers aside; the vendors set down

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their wares and turned to listen. Even the wind seemed to die down so that no word would be lost to the audience.

While the ruler held their attention, Sunharra tried to pull back into herself. The grain, which had been so resistant to her arrival, now seemed unwilling to let her depart. The Despot's voice droned on while Sunharra struggled to regain her distinct identity. *The scene must not be lost,* she thought. *But I am mistress and I must depart.*

The Despot's body hung about her like a cloak drenched by hot rain. *I am Sunharra,* she thought. *I was born in the village of Tanbonn. My mother wears her hair in grey braids that hang to her waist. My father was an archer in the Despot's service.* The cloak of flesh seemed to loosen a bit. The scene in the amphitheatre continued as she worked herself from the Despot's mind. *I have two blond brothers . . . the tall one wishes to become not a soldier but a weaver.*

One more tug and she was separate, viewing the Despot from a bench atop the amphitheatre. All about her the people sat open-mouthed as the ruler spoke.

"It is firm," Sunharra said. And she was back in the small workroom, kneeling as she had at the start. Weary, she dropped back into a sitting position. The grain had let her go, but it had taken a great measure of her strength.

The Mistress leaned forward to see the staff that had been created. Sunharra could see the piece clearly from where she sat. The fluted shaft was crowned by a sphere that depicted the Despot holding aloft his book of laws. His face, so lined with age as to be almost unrecognizable, nonetheless conveyed a sense of inner triumph.

"You have accomplished what no sculptress before you has dared. There has never been a work this size formed from gren. I have watched it grow these last hours and have had great hopes for it." The Mistress's head hung sadly as she contemplated the work. "It is unfortunate that you did not learn the lesson from your trials with the Viceroy's platter."

Sunharra bent to examine her work. She was exhausted, but content. The Mistress's objections could not be significant.

"Do you not understand the mind of this man?" the Mistress chided. "He is still in the rising arc of his life. Yet you show him aged. He will not wish to be reminded of his mortality each time he holds the staff of his office."

"No!" It seemed to Sunharra that the floor fell away from her. She lost her balance.

"Sunharra . . ."

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She heard the Mistress's voice, but it came from far away.

"Sunharra, you must give up the notion of gren. You have produced an elegant failure, but it is a failure nonetheless. I am certain that you can produce in ivorywood a scepter that the Despot will favor. Rest for a day, and then work the ivory."

Sunharra gave no answer. She was taken to bed, and lay for three days, sleeping more time than awake. In her dreams she saw the royal house that the Despot's sculptress would occupy, the garden, the workrooms, the servants that might be hers. If only she could do as the Mistress wanted—work the ivory, work the material that would give way to her needs.

But at each waking, the grenwood scepter dominated her thoughts. Was it the royal position that she so desperately wanted, or was it something else?

On the morning of the fourth day, she awoke to see the Mistress being carried to her bedside. "I have chosen my finest ivory branch," the old one began. "A workroom is prepared for you. . . ."

Sunharra did not answer.

"Perhaps you require another day's rest."

"The scepter is finished, Mistress." The young woman was surprised at the resolution in her voice.

"The gren . . . only the gren is finished."

"I will not leave it in a storeroom to be gnawed by rodents."

"Then you are the foolish girl I took you to be when you stepped through my doorway. Do you wish to bring the royal wrath upon you? Would you see soldiers tramping through your workroom, smashing your fine pieces? And what they may do with you afterwards I dare not imagine."

Sunharra, suddenly chilled, clutched at the bedding that was wrapped around her. She wondered if the Despot could be as cruel as the Mistress claimed. "Consider the scene I have carved. He may even draw comfort from my scepter . . . from the thought of surviving to advanced age."

The Mistress leaned her head out the opposite side of the sedan chair and spat noisily through the nearby window hole. "That is how much comfort he will draw from your scene."

"Ah, Mistress." Sunharra's voice fell. "You are the great Sculptress and I am of the second rank. You have found favor with the Viceroys and the Generals and the Ladies while I have merely pleased some common folk. But I think that your best works are those you kept for yourself."

"Best?" The tone was of indignation.

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Sunharra drew out her hand and pointed at the palanquin with its frieze of wild stags cavorting near the ruins of a castle. "This bed also . . . and other pieces I have seen."

The Mistress's face was pinched and red. "What do you know about my best work? Dress yourself. Dress yourself quickly and then I will show you something."

The young woman flung aside the heavy quilts as the chair-bearers discreetly turned their faces away from her. In just a few moments she was following the palanquin down the narrow staircase towards the Mistress's dining room.

"The strongbox!" the Sculptress shouted as they entered the huge room.

The two chair-bearers set her down and raced to a square floorstone near the edge of the dining table. With a duet of grunts, they pulled up the stone; from below they took an unadorned wooden box.

"There was a competition when I was younger," the Mistress began in a low voice. "My first chance to be the Despot's sculptress. The only time I seriously tried." The box was held aloft for her. She adjusted a row of levers on its side; a soft click sounded and then she opened the lid. "He wanted a wedding band. This is what I carved from sub-gren."

Sunharra reached moist fingers towards the palm of the Sculptress's hand. The wide band, created for a finger far thicker than her own, was rich in grey and brown grains. Its surface, however, seemed unadorned. She carried it towards the circle of burning candles.

"That is not for ordinary eyes. . . ." The Mistress's voice trailed off as Sunharra scrutinized the band. At first she saw only odd irregularities of the surface. The ring was carved, but not in the traditional manner. There were sharp peaks and sloping valleys, bristly patches and smooth flat places.

As the young woman turned the ring, the details became increasingly apparent. The Mistress had created a vast landscape, but shown as a bird might see it. Sunharra's eye crossed ragged cliffs. She followed the course of a river that wound leisurely towards the sea. She dipped down towards the ocean and thought she could see the white tips of the waves. "This is . . . remarkable."

The Mistress answered in a softened voice: "Remarkable for you perhaps. . . . To the Despot it would have been an insult. You take that ring. Wear it close to your heart."

"Mistress, I cannot."

"I was young like you then. I could not produce a work that the

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Despot would favor. To keep this one hidden where none could see it . . . that was my error."

"But . . ."

"Take it. And go. Do as you wish with the scepter, but never come here again." The Mistress clapped and was hurriedly carried from the room.

Within the hour, Sunharra was riding alone in the Mistress's carriage. At her feet sat her basket, provisioned for a long journey. Across her lap, thickly bundled, lay the heavy staff.

The road crossed meadows of tall grain, passed through thick forests, skirted a valley of lakes. The landscape reminded the young woman of the Mistress's wedding band, which now hung from a silk cord about her own neck. *Ah, the Mistress,* she thought. The aged one had given her the rarest of opportunities, and Sunharra had disappointed her. To see her protégé become the Despot's sculptress would have been a grand triumph. And yet . . .

Sunharra pushed back the netcloth wrapping to reveal the carved scene. She stroked with her forefinger the hand that held aloft the book of laws. Tamed now, the wood was cool to her touch. *If he keeps this work, it may change him,* she thought. *If . . .*

The two coachmen drove in shifts, allowing Sunharra only occasional rest periods. At mid-morning of the fifth day of travel they reached the castle walls. The driver halted at the sentry-box before the gate. The sculptress looked out at a sleepy-faced soldier who held a cocked crossbow. "I have brought a scepter to the Despot," she said. The words came out so quietly that she had to repeat them.

"Leave it with me," the soldier said indifferently.

"I cannot."

The hand that held the cross-bow twitched. "Then turn your carriage; clear the roadway."

Sunharra's lips were dry; she ached from days of riding. "This is *grenwood* sculpture," she said with irritation. "Do you understand?"

"Grenwood?" The sleepy eyes suddenly came alert. "Nobody can carve grenwood."

She lifted the staff and pushed aside a small section of wrapping. The thick-set man came forward, reached his free hand towards the piece. His calloused fingers stroked the smooth surface as he bit his lower lip. Then he reached for the ivorywood whistle that hung from a peg in his shelter.

Sunharra was kept waiting in a cold inner room for so long that she could not guess whether it was day or night. She paced about

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the room, staring at the tapestries until she had memorized every design. Then she tried to stretch out on a hard bench, but could not doze off. Would the Despot come, she wondered? Perhaps she had traveled all this way to be rebuffed by a courtier.

At long last the pair of doors was flung open. She rose and made a clumsy bow. Then she drew a deep breath and instantly lowered her gaze. This was no courtier! She caught in her peripheral vision an impression of riding boots and jointed leggings.

"We have left our hunt for this folly," he said in a grating voice. He slapped at his leggings; the sound resonated through the chamber. "If our sentries are mistaken then they are the hounds' dinner. You shall not get off so lightly."

The sculptress could not speak. She reached for the scepter and began to unwind the wrappings.

"Quickly!" The Despot pulled the bundle from her hands and finished the unwinding; he tossed the netcloth to the side. "You have carved gren," he said as he began to inspect the work. "That is plain enough. But what have you done with it?"

Her face burned as the ruler held the staff up to the chandelier. "What is this image you have formed? Have you also chosen our deathbed?"

She did not reply. But his words gave her surprising hope. The Despot had acknowledged his presence in the scene. That was a start.

"Lady, we see what you have made." He rotated the crown slowly to examine the complete design. Sunharra ventured to look at his eyes, and she saw the intensity of his gaze. "To have done this," he said with a faint hint of admiration, "you must be the most gifted sculptress in our realm. We have heard of no one else who can form gren. But your choice of subject matter . . ." He lowered the staff to his side and grasped it in his hand as his staff of office. "And you wish to be our sculptress? To carve the pieces great and small that we require?"

Sunharra was mesmerized by the man's eyes, as she had been long before at the procession. Her voice came, it seemed, from another's mouth: "Yes."

"We are not so great a fool as that."

"I do not . . ."

"You already depict us in our dotage! Do you think that we can trust you to carve our plates and our goblets, our furniture and our armor? We understand the power of wood." He lowered the staff, then lifted it again. A hint of satisfaction showed in the curve of his

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lips. "It is nicely balanced, is it not?" He paused with his legs apart and the staff held before him. To Sunharra, it seemed to add an essential dignity to his figure. "We must leave you," he said.

"My work . . ."

The Despot seemed pensive for a moment. He glanced from the scepter to Sunharra and then back at the scepter. "*One* work of yours will cause us no discomfort," he said in a throaty voice. "Yes. We will keep this. . . . And in return, you may have any woods in our storehouses that you require. But you shall not, clever lady, be our sculptress."

One work will suffice. As the Despot strode away, she fell back onto the bench and lay with her cheek against the smooth hard seat. *He will touch the scepter, keep it close to him. That is enough.* She recalled his face as he held the staff and knew she could not be wrong.

Sunharra returned to her village and to her modest workroom. With the woods supplied by the Despot, she became the best-known sculptress of the realm. Her works found their way into homes of nobles as well as common folk; some pieces were carried to distant lands. Never again, though, did she try to carve grenwood.

The keeper of the Scepter pauses. A child steps forward. "But what of the Despot?" he demands. "What happened to him?"

"The Despot mellowed," the gentleman replies softly. "As Sunharra had expected. He soon ceased his conquering and began instead to improve his realm."

"But the scene on the Scepter!"

"That happened too. The Despot compiled his book of laws. Sunharra attended the very scene that she had engraved so many years earlier."

"You are telling us folk tales," an older child complains. "None of it can be proved. Tell us some facts."

"Folk tales? Perhaps," says the old fellow with a wink in the direction of the one who is taking a coin from her purse. He pauses for a moment, grins as if a great revelation has come to him. "We have many stories of the artisans of Sunharra's time," he says, "and of the works they produced. But they used no metals and their wooden objects decayed long ago. With one exception . . . Come, touch the piece."

He turns to the Scepter, in its flood-lit niche behind him. It is a staff as tall as himself. The visitors edge closer. The face on its crown is so clearly etched that one expects to hear the Despot speak.

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The hands push forward. Adults as well as children cannot resist the invitation. To the touch, the wood is smooth and hard as polished stone.

"We have many tales of the old artworks," the gentleman reiterates, "but only this one by Sunharra has survived. It is perfectly preserved; there is no sign of wear or decay."

BULL IN A CHINA SHOP

Artlessly smartlessly
Poor Planet Jupiter,
Cumbrous and awkward, has
  Nary a friend—
Last time he played with a
Fellowsunorbital,
Asteroids marked what was
  Left in the end!

—John D. Seats

I TRIED!

Poetry woeitry
Dear Mister Scithers, Sir;
Getting rejected at
  Least ninety times
Gives me the feeling that,
Incomprehensibly,
Maybe you don't like the
  Way I write poems.

—John D. Seats

FIRE OR ICE

At some dismal, distant date
The universe will meet its fate
Art and science both allow
And contrive to tell us how.
I, for one, don't wish to learn
If, at the end, we'll freeze or burn
And obtuse verse or windy prose
Can only tell what they suppose.
Still, an insistent inner voice
Whispers, "Since we have no choice
In cosmic matters beyond our ken
Forget how, just tell us when."

—Bernard Blicksilver

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WHAT IN SOLEMN SILENCE

by Charles L. Grant

art: Renée Smith

The author has been a full-time (though not always, he admits, a bill-paying) writer for six years, with some 70 stories out, 10 novels that he'll admit to, 6 anthologies, 2 Nebulae, and a World Fantasy Award. His first collection, Tales from Nightside, *was published recently by Arkham House; and his second by Berkley. There are more trees than people where he lives; he has more bookcases than other furniture; and if he could remember where in Shakespeare's works he stole the title of this one, he'd tell us . . . or so he says.*

It happens to all of us, the lecturers tell us in pedantic certainty—birth, death, and somewhere closer to the latter than the former we begin to short circuit. What is near becomes vague, and what is distanced becomes focused, and only the best of us are able to tell the difference. But none of them have ever been able to tell me why ribbons of images etch blood through one's mind, why sunsets flare behind eyes seldom squinting, why excavations of memories are not memories at all. I've asked, but they've no answers. And the answers I have they shy from, like shadows.

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In the beginning, growing old was a pleasure; that had been taught me by my parents in Wyoming. Growing old was an adventure; that had been taught me by my paternal uncle, Michael. They had not lied, and for a time I'd been grateful. For a time there were no images, nor memories not mine.

Then Michael called me and asked me to come west. He was thirty when I was born, fifty when my parents died, ninety-six when he called me in New York and destroyed all my dreaming.

I was reluctant to go. I saw him seldom, though often enough to keep us smiling at each other, having been rather too busy making a modest name for myself in the field of economics. Not theory; I couldn't stand theory. Too much talk, not enough action. Instead, I'd taken myself into the pits and the arenas and had come out with money. The amounts were not tremendous as upper brackets go, but sufficient unto the manor thereof. My wife married me for love, came to love my money and gave me four children in return. They, in turn, married for love, took my money as dowry and multiplied it in medicine, in law, and one damned fool in bloody politics.

I was, for the most part, pleased. I imagined myself a model of my race, holding my head high in pure Indian pride (in fact, I was bragging, though I didn't see that until later), and not above using my so-called minority position to position myself as well as I could. Once the conservatives had failed, you see, and the liberals had been called back on their slightly arthritic white geldings, it was much easier to appeal to sullied history that included me than history that included Custer.

But Michael called, late one evening in April. A chilled April that year (or so it seemed to me), not yet recovered from a vicious white winter that had slowly turned grey. Amanda answered, and I could hear her murmurs in the bedroom. I was reading at the time, and too tired to follow the plot or the page. It had been that way for several weeks. Office fatigue, the doctors had informed me. Unmindful of my age, Amanda had noted with a sly, loving grin. A little of both, I admitted to myself, and had already begun easing the reins into the hands of subordinates. Not quite a burnt-out case, but too close not to feel the lick of the flame.

"Peter? Peter, you'll never guess who's calling."

Images etched; memories; shadows.

"Michael," I called out. "Who the hell else would bother me at midnight?"

She came to the study door. Tall, two years older, bearing her age with a grace that disgraced me. I, the Indian, was supposed to be

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proudly weathered and solemn and only streaked grey with all those years; she, the Anglo, was supposed to be hunched and wrinkled and sagging at every curve. We both pretended it was always the case.

"You're impossible, you know," she said. "I used to think you were in touch with the spirit of the telephone system. Now I think you just read minds."

I rose as agilely as I could, put aside the book, and as I walked past her I kissed her soundly on the cheek. She was the only one in the world I allowed to prick my blood, because she was the only one I'd met who could do it without flinching, without a stirring of false conscience.

There was a great deal of static on the line, but his voice was not as clear as I'd thought I remembered.

"Peter? Is that you, Peter?"

"Michael! For god's sake, are you all right?"

I had a vision: a man in bed, wrapped tightly in a sheet, vials and tubes and monitors and nurses. Pallid drawn flesh, the stench of the dying who don't know when to die.

"Fine, just fine. I'm home, you know."

I flicked a thumb against my temple. So much for the vision. Home, for Michael, had always been Wyoming, just outside the boundary of the old Wind River Reservation. A small house of shingle and slate, always well kept because he'd never been without the help of friends, particularly women who thought they'd someday tame him. Four of them had, but he'd outlived them with a grin.

"So how are you, Uncle?" Softer, now that the fear had passed.

"A little here, a little there, you know how it is. Thank you for the books, Peter. They were very good."

"You've read them already?"

"Yes. My legs being what they are, I sit a lot, you know. My eyes being what they are, I can't see the hawks."

I said nothing. I'd been a city Indian most of my life, and had never been able to feel as he did, out in the open. I wanted to. I tried. But what I had was a vague sense of unease and a strong sense of failure. He knew that. And man that he was, he didn't pity; he only tried to help me more gently.

"Peter? Peter, it's been a long time."

"A couple of years, Uncle."

"A long time. I think I'd like to see you—if you can manage it, that is."

The habits of business had me automatically pause, flipping through a mind-calendar for the first free date while my mouth

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prepared the usual excuses. Then, quite without warning, I saw a shadow in the room's far corner. The light was behind me, and I imagined it my own. But when I shifted it didn't move. No features, no outline. A shadow within a shadow until I blinked hard and it vanished. I would have grinned and dismissed it, if it had been the first time. But it wasn't. A half-dozen times at least, over the past two months.

"Peter? I understand, you know. I may be senile, but I do understand. Your father, when he was eight, he made himself a necklace of cat bones he'd found behind the house. He thought it would bring him luck, tie him in with his spirits. It didn't. It smelled, and Mother tossed it away after two or three days."

"You made that up, Michael."

"No. I remember."

That I believed. And I believed, as he continued with something about a dog the two of them had when they were eight, that he was babbling. He could have heard the "no" in my tone and rang off after pleasantries and questions about Amanda. But he didn't. He talked for half an hour before I realized he was afraid.

"Two weeks, Michael," I said suddenly, interrupting. "Let me clear up a couple of things and Amanda and I will be there in two weeks."

The line was dead before I'd finished the last word.

Later, as we lay in bed, Amanda holding my hand, she wondered aloud if he had finally, after all these years, come down with something he couldn't battle on his own.

"I don't think so. He is bothered, but I don't think he's ill."

"Bothered about what?"

"He didn't say."

She laughed quietly and squeezed my fingers. "Does he ever? And speaking of which we weren't at all, did you remember the boys' birthday cards?" She waited for my wince and punched my arm. "Good. I did, so they won't get two sets like they did last year."

"If you knew I was going to forget, why . . . never mind. Just do the packing, all right, so I don't forget my shoes."

She did, and I didn't, and by the time we touched down in Cheyenne and had hired a car I was grateful for her calm. I was . . . upset. Five times I'd tried contacting Michael, but no one answered the phone. No busy signal, no line disruption—just a steady, unnerving ringing that had me losing more sleep than I wanted. And when we arrived at the house two hours later, no one was there.

There were stars, but I didn't see them; a distant wind marking the mountains, but I didn't feel it. I stepped away from the narrow

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porch, looked to the car and shrugged elaborately so Amanda could see. Then I walked around the house, staring at the windows, trying to see through them, but the place was empty. I could feel it. A place of dust and cobwebs and a chill rising from the wood. My hands ducked quickly into my coat pockets and bunched into fists. My shoulders hunched, and I breathed harshly through my mouth.

Back at the car Amanda was standing by the hood, kerchief about her hair, talking softly with a young woman I'd never seen before. They turned as I approached, Amanda reaching for my hand.

"This is Marleen, Peter," she said. "Michael's neighbor."

"Where is he?" I said; shortly, I'm afraid, but niceties took time.

The woman shrugged. "Last time I saw him he had a thing on his back, a pack? Said he was going walking. My husband, George, he wanted to get the police or something in Washakie, but I told him it was a free country, y'know? And if the old man wanted to go walking that was his business."

"Yes," I said. "How long ago was this?"

She put a finger to her chin and stared at the ground. "Tuesday, I guess. No, Wednesday. That's the day I took—"

"Three days ago," I said. "My god, didn't you—" A look from Amanda stilled me, but barely. I strained the woman a smile, Amanda thanked her, and we drove off.

"Where?"

I didn't know. I was trying to remember all the places he'd told me of, the hunting, the fishing, the spots where he'd taken my children during the summer and showed them how it had been. But none of them stuck. Fleeting glimpses of green, of pine, of bright flowing water. No signs, no maps, and I gripped the wheel white-knuckled as the town slipped away and we were facing the mountains.

I remembered, then, stories I'd heard as a child. Of old ones who knew their time was past, their time coming, and they'd slip out of camp and walk into the hills. No burdens on family, no painful lingering. A walk, and a stopping; so simple it spawned terror. Yet I couldn't believe that of Michael. He enjoyed the role, no question about it, but he was too stubborn to let go so easily. His goal was a full century, and he was still four years short. So it couldn't have been that, as romantic as it sounded. It had to do with the call; I knew it, and couldn't prove it.

We drove until midnight, turned around and took a room at the first motel we could find. Amanda was comforting. She sang as she showered, rubbed my back and chest, stayed on her own side of the

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bed while I stared at the ceiling. She never pretended to know me to the core, and when she came to a wall she would search for the flaws, then stand back and wait.

I dozed, I think, a handful of minutes at a time.

I got up and went to the large, only window, tried to identify the constellations and dozed again on my feet, this time sending myself into space, unsuited. I walked there, past an enormous gas giant with a gloating red eye, a beringed and spinning top winking lightning through its dun cover, a comet in the distance, a comet minus its tail. I watched it approach, then turned and ran away. Stood with my forehead against the cold pane and decided getting old wasn't fun anymore.

With a dramatic sigh no one heard but me I turned back to the bed, and stopped. In the corner, barely touched by the parking lot's glow, was a shadow. Clearer now, much clearer than those I'd been seeing back home. A figure; without question, a figure. But I couldn't tell if it were a man or a woman, what it was wearing, if it had a face. I glanced outside, and there was no one there. I raised an arm, but the shadow didn't follow.

I rubbed my eyes hard, and the shadow was gone.

The following day I rented a four-wheel-drive vehicle and took to the side roads. Amanda cautioned me against getting lost, and I didn't. Neither did I keep track of the time or the mileage. I drove and I searched and I saw the backs of creatures only known to me in zoos, a valley so damned vast it looked like an ocean; there were trees beyond counting, and things coasting on the wind. But I could not find Michael, and I could not find a clue.

The second day was the same. On the third Amanda's patience strained. On the fourth the shadows began appearing in broad daylight, no more distinct and still vanishing at a blink. At the end of the week she decided to go home. I stayed at the motel and studied a map. Studied my memories, screaming silently at times because the people were there but not the places, not the times. The police had joined me—helicopters aloft and hikers below, a few boats on the rivers, advisories to campers.

On the tenth night I had a dream: Father was walking with me along the bank of a stream. It was summer, school out, and we were visiting Uncle Michael. I was marveling and exclaiming and jumping and laughing. Father was young. Mother was young, and carrying my brother William who would die of cancer at twenty-eight, the day after Michael called to tell us William was done. We rounded a sharp bend, and I saw the silver flashing. But when I tugged at

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my father's arm he only laughed and hoisted me kicking to his shoulder. I pointed and he resisted, and I woke up, wondering.

It was the first time in years I'd remembered Michael's call about William, and remembered the terror I'd seen in Mother's eyes.

On the thirteenth night I had a dream: I was twenty-three, standing at the embankment near the foot of Tower Bridge. Behind me was the roar of a crowd enjoying a mock-joust in the Tower's grassy moat. Below me, I could hear the Thames slapping against stone. Amanda was beside me and she had her hand in my pocket. I was embarrassed. I was positive every passer-by could see what she was doing, and though I wanted desperately to slip my hand around her back and take hold of the side of her breast, I only squirmed like a docked fish until she laughed and pulled away. I tried to make light of it, pointed out the ships on the river, the barges, the tug boats, the silver thing flashing the sun so brightly I couldn't stare for very long. She asked me what it was. I didn't know. I woke up.

In the middle of the third week I returned to Michael's house for at least the fifth time. I hoped for a letter written but unsent, a journal, a diary, lines underlined in books. Anything; but there was nothing. Nothing in the larder, nothing in the refrigerator. I located his doctor, who told me he was in reasonable health, except for his appetite.

I frowned, puzzled. "Appetite? What was wrong, then?"

"He didn't have one."

I shook my head. "The man ate like a horse."

"Not recently. Most of the time, I understand, he would only pick at his meals. When friends took him to a restaurant, he'd only take the water, if that."

His friends, as few as they were, were just as unhelpful. They admired the old man's seeming ability to keep going on nothing, but it frustrated them too because he was wasting away.

I confronted the doctor again. "Cancer," I said, thinking of my brother.

"No, not a chance."

On the twenty-fourth night I had a dream: I was walking through clouds of smoke-colored dust, trying to locate the source of lightning-bright flashing. I was hot, sweating, my clothes stripping off in shreds. My feet blistered, my hands peeled their flesh, and my eyes felt as though they were ready to pop. I woke just before I could let go a scream, drank five glasses of water before I felt cool again.

The police and the forest service abandoned the search. I was exhausted. I'd lost at least fifteen pounds traipsing over those

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damned trails, another fifteen worrying. And when Amanda called to demand my body I was on the first plane back without a moment's compunction.

And I sat on the couch and wept in her arms. He was dead. I knew it, and she had known it, I think, from the very first night. Michael was dead, and my past had gone with him. It's ridiculous how a man can't say I love you to a man he loves, how he thinks of it only when the other man can't hear. But I had loved him. Oh, he'd frightened the hell out of me sometimes with his stories and his laugh, and he frustrated me whenever he'd get it into his head to play Chief for the Anglos. But he was thirty when I was born, and I was sixty-six when he died and took my past with him.

The dreams continued. Once a week, never more. I was walking, or laughing, or hurting, or loving, and all of it happening more than thirty years ago. The silver was there, too, and glimpses of shadows.

One afternoon I told Amanda to call our youngest son because I thought he was ill. She did, and he was. I shrugged. A father's privilege.

By the end of May I'd decided to write down the dreams. Perhaps, I thought without telling Amanda, I'd get a book from the memories. Instant nostalgia from a minority point-of-view.

On the last day of June the telephone rang at fifteen past seven, and I leapt from the kitchen table and ran into the study to snatch the receiver from Amanda's hand.

"What the *Hell* are you doing, you stupid old bastard? Jesus Christ, don't you realize how sick we've all been?"

Amanda gasped and backed away.

A silence on the line, a buzzing of static. I glowered at the bookshelves until I heard the voice.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course I am, Michael! You're the one who's disappeared. For god's sake, where—"

"I am in Cheyenne."

"Cheyenne?"

"In a hospital."

Vials and wires and monitors and—"Damn, Michael, what—"

"Peter, I'm not supposed to be out here. The hall is cold. They gave me this nightgown and it doesn't close in the back. A nurse will come by. You listen to me."

I did. And as I did, my grip on the receiver tightened, loosened. Further, and I reached blindly for my chair, avoiding Amanda's questioning look. There were moments during the next twenty min-

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utes when I had to jab a finger across my eyes to keep the tears away, grab hold of a knee so she wouldn't see me trembling. And when he was done, I slumped and stared at the floor.

"Darling, are you feeling all right? What's wrong with Michael?"

You've reached the age, Peter, so you must have the dreams.

"Exposure, he says. He got lost, he says."

I liked them at first. Nightmares were to be expected and they weren't so bad.

"Are you . . . are you going out there to see him?"

"I don't know. I gather he's getting the best care they have."

"Is it enough?"

But I get mixed up sometimes. Times when I think I'm talking to your father, and times I don't remember at all.

"I hope so."

"Maybe you should come to bed, Peter."

Do you remember the night I called about William?

"Later. I need to think."

I was going to let them test me, for whatever the name is they call it when you see things like that. I thought it would be great fun to be a famous old man. I would be in the history books without fighting in a war. But then there were the shadows. Peter, do you see the shadows?

"Good-night, then, love. But please don't stay up too late. You know what the doctor says."

I knew what they were after a while. Dreams trying to come during the day. I guess I'm crazy. You don't dream with your eyes open. You see things. And if what I see in the day is as true as what I see in the night . . . I did not get lost, Peter. I wanted to go away.

It was well past dawn before I moved again, and then only because the hospital called to tell me Michael had died. I woke Amanda and packed a bag. She wanted to go with me, but I told her I would send for her. Personal. Family. I had lost him twice, and I wanted to see him alone.

The doctors were quite clear, quite confident: exposure, age, a general failing of health. I asked to see him, and after a few mutterings and grumblings they allowed me in the room.

Exposure. Age. A general failing of health.

His hair was pure white, his face pocked with hollows; crevices instead of lines, a taut pulling at the temples. I stood at the foot of the bed and lay a hand on his ankle—bone, no flesh. And even with his eyes closed I was sure I heard him screaming.

I sold everything I could and retired, bought a place near Michael's

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mountains and brought my children in to see me. Amanda hovered constantly, her hair dimming, her expression solemn. They all thought I was dying and wanted to be near my ancestors. Perhaps it's true; I don't know. About the second part anyway, I don't know.

But the first part I'm positive will happen any time during the next twenty years or so. The shadows living constantly over there in the corners are defining themselves as I get less and less sleep, as my appetite fails. I'm told, when I'm not supposed to be listening, that I'm suffering as Michael did, from the onset of senility. I see things, hear things, I go for long walks and measure the stars. I forget what happened yesterday and remember a test I had in high school.

This morning I even forgot Amanda.

But even that I could stand, because it's comprehensible. I read about it, hear about it, see it on television.

What bothers me are the other things. The other things I remember. Things I know I never lived, but were real just the same. Are real, actually. As real as the way I knew about my son's illness, the way Michael knew about William. It's age. Something short-circuits sooner or later, and nobody listens to the ravings of crones, the rantings of gnomes. That's the worst part. Nobody listens.

Something short-circuits and time reverses: the past becomes the present, the present doesn't exist, and the future . . . becomes the shadows that gain slow definition. They grew clear for Michael and he saw what they were, knew they had something to do with the silvery flashing things that intrude on my dreams. And when he could no longer stand it, he allowed himself a scream.

So I sit here and grow laconic while I try to make them understand. It's coming, we know, all us greybeards and rockers, from the place where I once walked, beyond the moon, beneath the stars. I would like it to be me, the one who is heard. I hope so, because it's soon. So soon, that when Michael knew it he decided not to be around.

And when I learn it too—as I will while the shadows take on slow color—what in solemn silence was my laughter may twist to a scream.

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ADVENTURES IN UNHISTORY: THE BOY WHO CRIED WEREWOLF

by Avram Davidson

art: Jack Gaughan

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"In many places the tradition lingers that migratory birds become men when in other lands. A traveler far from home was amazed when a stranger called him by name and asked about each member of his family. The mystery was solved when he learned [that] the stranger was the stork that each year built its nest upon his roof" in the home-city. —This is from Clark B. Firestone's marvelous book, *The Coasts of Illusion.* If it has or has not anything to do with the old story that the stork brings babies, I cannot say. As this is an Adventure in Unhistory, I wish to unsimplify matters by mentioning that in at least one Caribbean country, Belize (formerly British Honduras), the pelican is sometimes called "stork." The pelican, when its pouch is empty, does bear a resemblance to a small stork; when the pouch is full, the burden is clearly visible though its nature remains invisible as it flies by; how easy to tell a child, "It's got a baby in there. . . ." But I am not particularly concerned with such stories right now; the subject of this Adventure is *werewolf* . . . though let me tell you that I am not offering the literary version of a horror movie. If you want a horror movie, go and watch one. And if you stay here, better be prepared to read a lot of big words, strange names, and tales of the odd and curious.

In the Adventure *An Abundance of Dragons,* we learned that Apollo and Zeus, not at all content with having both killed dragons, each on different occasions assumed the forms of dragons—or, if you prefer, they changed themselves into dragons. Not, fortunately (or unfortunately) forever . . . just for a while. Zeus was better at this than Apollo; well, he was older, for one thing. So now let's hear what a long-later, and yet, to us, long-ago, teller of tales, one Reverend Father François Rabelais, M.D., had to say on the subject, in his book *Gargantua and Pantagruel.* (I think you're all old enough to read it, and if you do read it and don't appreciate it, the fault must be yours.) Panurge is speaking about Zeus:

> He can transform himself hundreds and thousands of times, into a swan, a bull, a satyr, a shower of gold, or a cuckoo, as he did when he took the maidenhead of his sister Juno [Hera]; into an eagle, a ram, or a pigeon, as he did when he was in love with the maiden Phthia . . . into fire, into a serpent, or even into a flea . . . but I'll catch him by the neck. And do you know what I'll do to him? I'll do what Saturn did to his father Caelus. . . . I'll cut off his ballocks flush with his bum; there won't be a shred left [and] he'll never be pope, for *testiculos no habet.*

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It is not I who has chosen to, as it were, veil the last three words "in the decent obscurity of a learned language" (was it Gibbon who said that? or was it perhaps Queen Victoria?). The choice was that of good old funny Father Rabelais, that's who. Considering what he chose to leave *un*veiled, well—

Anyway, let us remember that Dr. Rabelais was a priest and was not unfrocked, although he did get into trouble a couple of times, because as an M.D. he practiced surgery, in violation of the principle that "the Church abhors the shedding of blood." However.

The threats of a character in a 16th-century novel against a pagan god abhorred not alone for sexual lollygagging but for promiscuous shape-shifting will amuse us but briefly, and I include them in this utterly serious series of adventures merely to show that shape-shifting—as some call it—or metamorphosis, as others call it—and some call it lycanthropy (remember that word)—has a very old history and an, one might say, honorable pedigree: and then again, one might not. The basic information is of course included in sources, *other* sources, such as *Bulfinch's Mythology;* but Rabelais is more fun.

However, as the information is not after all classified, and as the word **werewolf** means man-wolf, perhaps the precedent of Zeus, no more than that of Apollo, does not or ought not count. After all, it excites no great surprise that Olympian Zeus or some other phony god used to go around changing his own shape and for that matter that of others. Conversation in ancient Greece, almost any afternoon:

Maiden: Oh my *god,* Zeus! Here comes your *wife!*
Zeus: She mustn't find you here; *zap!* you're a laurel tree!—Why, *hel*-lo, dear! Fancy meeting *you* here in the groves of Arcadia; lovely afternoon, isn't it?
Mrs. Zeus: What are you doing with your arms around that laurel tree?

Ah well. Changing people into things was almost, one might say, part of a Greek god's profession. But what about human beings changing shape on their own?

There is the immensely interesting reference in the Bible to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, of whom, we are told, his hair grew long, and thick as feathers, and his skin was wet with the dew, and he ate grass like an ox. Boanthropy, some call this. However, we are not told that he did this as a form of returning to the simpler life as it were; there is anyway some sort of hint of some sort of

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conversation, as it might be like *this:*

The Lord of Hosts: Carry My people away captive, would you?
Zap!
Nebuchadnezzar: **Mooooo!**

And the Bible indicates that this odd interval in Nebuchadnezzar's reign lasted seven years. The records of ancient Babylon do not tell us anything of the sort, no such tell-tale phrase as, "O King, live for ever! I brought you some nice hay;" no: nothing of the sort. There is merely an interval in the records during which Nebuchadnezzar is not recorded as doing anything at all. And this interval lasts for seven years. *Ver*-ry interesting . . .

But coming down to more modern times, within the memory of living men, although you better believe it very *few* living men, there was once an unwritten law, an Order of the Day (or, rather, Night), among the Hindu guards on duty around the British governor's lodge in Bombay, to the effect that if a cat passed a guard on night duty, the guard was to come to attention and present arms. The reason was that the Governor was well-known to change into a cat at night. What the Governor *did,* in the form of a cat, at night, the Hindu guards considered none of their damned business: rank has its privileges: *their* business was to salute. Which they did, in the form of executing the Present Arms. The thought occurred to me, "Pity Kipling never heard of that. Would have made a good story for him." Then the thought occurred to me, maybe Kipling *had* heard of that. Kipling, after all, at one time lived in Bombay. And not much escaped his eyes. Or ears. *My* opinion, Ruddy simply decided to keep his ruddy mouth shut. *Pit*-ty. And, inasmuch as we observe no notice in the newspaper, *The Times of India,* of that period (or, for that matter, of any other period) to some such effect as this:

> Our Correspondent inquired of His Excellency as to what plans His Excellency may have made in regard to a Third Reading before the Council of the Bombay-Poona Railroad Act, Revised. His Excellency was kind enough to say in reply, **"Mrowp."**

No. No such story in the newspapers. What we savants call the argument *ab silentio;* argal, we must assume that the Governor changed back into his merely human form each night, after roaming

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the tiles and committing the god knows what sort of fantods.

But that is an instance of a were*cat,* and is not only not as exciting as an instance of a were*wolf*, it depends on merely common report and tradition. However, that is as much as any such account is based on. Even in a good light. There are no, I repeat *no,* accounts of anyone under clinical observation having changed his or her shape or form from that of a human being into a being non-human, let alone changing back again. Not that this proves it never happened, mind you. After all, some animals never breed in captivity. So perhaps werewolves cannot were, or anyway, change, in captivity. What a dreadful thought!, that some poor person having gone out in the full, or even the dark, of the moon, one nice night, to become a, say, were-wombat, was captured untimely by some nasty trapper employed by a nasty dealer in wild animals; and now reposes, if that is the right verb, in the Sydney, or perhaps the San Diego Zoo, unable to return to its or his rightful shape; and surely not sufficiently compensated by a diet of peanuts and bottle-caps, all thoughtfully thrown in the cage by small boys in a state of acute boredom. . . .

Is there any evidence that this ever happened?

Well, there was the case of the duck-billed platypus which escaped from the Bronx Zoo in the late '40s. A duck-billed platypus is not an animal very common in the Bronx. And yet, it was never seen again. It would be interesting if we could find out if anyone speaking with a strong Austrylian accent myde a sudden appearance in the Bronx at that time. Ver-ry interesting. Ever hear of Victor Neuberg? No? Shamed of yourselves. Ever hear of Aleister Crowley? *Yes?* Shamed of yourselves. Well, Victor Neuberg, occultist, poet, and editor, commonly called The Vickybird, was once an adept of Aleister Crowley, the diabolist, selftermed The Wickedest Man in the World and the Great Beast, and of whom the Kindest Thing which many people who knew him could find to say was *"Sinister."* And, somehow, one knows how these things happen, Victor and Aleister had a grand falling-out. And it was said, and indeed it *is* said, that Crowley changed Neuberg into a camel. And sold him to the Dublin Zoo. And left him there. For six years. One year less than King Neb. I don't know just how Neuberg was supposed to have gotten back into his right form again. I *do* know that all accounts, credulous or skeptical, agree that Victor would never so much as discuss the matter, would neither confirm nor deny it . . . but would become Dreadfully Agitated if Aleister Crowley's name was so much as mentioned in his presence. Verdict? As the Scotch juries sometimes say, *Not Proven.*

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Which has been translated as, Not Guilty and Don't Do It Again.

Again, however, I am not quite sure if this counts as a bona fide case of were-camelism; after all, Neuberg was not said to have done it by himself; and it is not said that he even tried to, which is probably just as well, because all sides agree that while he was a rather *sweet* chap, poor old Vickybird, he was definitely ineffectual, couldn't find his behind with both hands in the dark, and would likely have turned up with one hump instead of two, and either that *one* or those *two* in the altogether and embarrassingly wrong place or places.

However. Over the course of many years I have accumulated many notes on the subject of shape-shifting in ancient times. I have reports on people being changed into bears, snakes, dragons, magpies, locusts, stones, shadows, cuckoos, pigs, sheerwaters, poplar trees, peonies, laurel trees, myrtles, artichokes, narcissus, crocus, saffron, smilax, swans, and doves, and God-knows-how-many other items; of ancient reports I've found on people changing into *wolves,* one—perhaps the oldest one—one was the terrible case of King Lycaon, who offered his own son as a sacrifice and then ate him; Zeus, evidently for once not in a humorous mood, turned the bestial king into a, well, *beast.* Videlicet a wolf. Ovid describes this in his book *Metamorphosis* more vividly than I could hope to, the monarch's limbs becoming shaggy and his snout commencing to slaver, and then the voice turning into a howl: and then the king lopes off into the forest. . . . We shall return to this.

Most written accounts of werewolfery, or, to use a more preferred word, lycanthropy—which would, literally, mean *wolfmanism*—and here I am reminded of an Incident. Which took place in Greenwich Village during the very late 1950s or very early 1960s, when I went to call upon a friend, Wilma Case (not her real name), then recently married to a friend who is a well-known writer of science fiction under a pen-name. Wilma had not yet gotten used to life in picturesque Greenwich Village; in fact, she was still a bit nervous about it, so when I knocked at the door she did not open it, but asked, cautiously, "Who is it?" Well, I must confess that the devil entered into me, and instead of saying something simple, as it might be: "The man from Abercrombie and Fitch, with the snowshoes;" instead, I said, "National Lycanthropy Week, help the poor werewolves, OW-*wooo!*" And the dog next door (did *I* know there was a dog next door? *No.* People don't tell me these things), the dog next door went OOO-woo-OO. And the dog upstairs went OW-**wow**-WOWW. And the dog across the way—but by this time poor Wilma

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was piling the furniture up against the door, and I had a lot of talking to do before I could persuade her to unpile it and let me in. (By that time, of course, I had re-assumed my human shape.)

—But I digress, don't I? All the damned time. Most written accounts of lycanthropy have been, to say the least, unfavorable. It is, after all, somewhat upsetting to think that one's neighbor, one's enemy, even one's friend and even one's own wife or husband, perhaps; is capable of, so to speak, melting like a wax image and before the melt-down is complete, flowing into shape again .... but into quite a different shape. I recall not one European account of a benevolent werewolf. Or were-anything-else. (By the way. **Were** (or **Wer**), in this instance, is not a past or conditional form of **was**. It is an old Anglo-Saxon word related to the Latin **vir**, meaning man. Or so it has been commonly said; there is another explanation, and we'll get to it . . . by and by . . . "Anon, sir, anon.")

However. A modern writer named Marika Kriss, in her book *Werewolves, Shapeshifters, and Skinwalkers,* gives a new and different aspect, or view. Hearken:

> We know about the werewolf only through horror tales in which dungeons, hidden passages, and screaming maidens are de rigueur, a combination of repetition and omission that stifles investigation by creating the illusion that there is nothing more to know. No one tells us of werewolves who are leaders of their people, werewolves who were patriots, those who were saviors and heroes, or those who were ordinary rather humdrum citizens.
>
> Too much is told about the gore. [. . .] The cliché shows the werewolf as a guilty, furtive thing. . . . Nothing is written about the person who is accepted by his community and goes about his daily chores contentedly . . . . [who] has felt the stretch and coordination of four legs loping effortlessly . . . [who] knows a strange exciting world of odor . . . the ecstasy of smelling a bitch in season . . . has matched his quickness and cunning against the evasiveness of a rabbit . . . has moved silently through the night, hearing sounds to which human ears are deaf. . . .

"Werewolves," says Marika Kriss, "werewolves are inexplicable . . . like other men."

As Charles Fort said, in a saying which I quote forever, "In meansuring a circle, one begins anywhere." This, then, is as good as any

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place to point out that unlike "lycanthrope," werewolf does not mean wolfman. It means manwolf.

Now, how do such stories get started?—a question, which, by its very form, assumes that such reports are merely, well, stories. And here I will give you a very typical answer. It is placed in the mouths of people called "Rationalist" by a writer who was named, or who *said* he was named, Eliot O'Donnell: and, whatever else Eliot O'Donnell may have been, Eliot O'Donnell was not a Rationalist. *Quote:* "The anthropophagi," by which he means cannibals, "unable to suppress their appetite for human food," by which he means human flesh, "taking advantage of the general awe in which the wolf is held by their neighbors, dress themselves up in the skins of that beast, and, prowling about lonely, isolated spots at night, pounce upon those people they can most easily overpower. Rumors (most probably started by the murderers themselves) speedily get into circulation that the mangled and half-eaten remains of the villagers are attributable to creatures half-human and half-wolf, that have been seen gliding about certain places after dark. The simple country-folk, among whom superstitions are rife, are only too ready to give credence to such reports; the existence of the monsters becomes an established thing, whilst the localities that harbour them are regarded with horror. . . ."

. . . Well, that's *one* explanation.

The writer named Frank Hamel gives some others, which may be considered to lie in between those of O'Donnell and Kriss. Frank Hamel begins with a simple statement, perfectly correct, that "Folklore abounds in incidents which are based on the impermanence of form and which tell of people changing into animals or animals changing into human beings." But *why* does folklore abound in them? And Frank Hamel goes on to suggest a few reasons. "Savage races do not necessarily connect the idea of transformation with any thought of evil. They find the plan of impersonating an animal in its lair, for the sake of safety, say, extremely useful. They have the best of reasons for developing a special attribute, such as the keen scent of the hound, the long sight of the eagle, the natural protective power against cold possessed by the wolf and so on, imitative suggestion which occurs in many of their primitive customs. Thus the Cherokee Indian when starting on a winter's journey endeavors by singing and other mimetic action to identify himself with the wolf . . . or other wild animals, the feet of which are regarded by him as impervious to frost-bite. The words he chants mean, 'I become a real wolf . . .' "—or whatever: a fox, maybe, or a possum— "Then

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he gives a long howl to imitate the wolf . . . and scratches the ground." —In other words: I howl, therefore I am . . . And maybe I point out to you how many Scout troops contain a Wolf Patrol? Ah, but you say, the Scouts are not serious in this. Well, no, I suppose not. After all, I once was a member of the Raven Patrol, and the scoutmaster never said that we should eat dead men's eyes in order to develop keener sight. Still . . .

There was a best-selling novel of the 1930s called *The Werewolf of Paris;* by Guy Endore—by the way, not his real name . . . he had changed it . . . and the werewolf himself was named Bertrand; and, although his fictitious deeds were indeed dreadful, he himself was a sympathetic character: he simply could not help it. In fact, and it *is* a fact, he was not entirely fictional. He appears as well in one of the short stories of de Maupassant. And, what is more, perhaps, to the point: he appears as well in the criminal reports of the Paris police. This is one of the latest—and, indeed, it may well have been one of the last—documented cases associated with the word **werewolf.** It is indeed a horrible case.

In the year 1847, the graves in the principal cemetery of Paris were subject to repeated violation. The bodies were not stolen in order to be used by medical students, they were not held for ransom; in fact, they were not removed from the cemetery at all. In every instance they had been partially devoured. The watchers of the dead, that is to say, the custodians of the cemetery, were completely demoralized, and babbled of a strange shape, part human, part animal, which lurked and scurried and scuttled . . . and vanished. Sic the dogs on the monster? *Mais oui* . . . but the dogs in turn would howl and cower and run . . . in the opposite direction. Finally it was determined to set a booby-trap with a trip-snare at that part of the graveyard most frequented by the ogre: that is, the place over which escape was made—the lowest part of the wall, a mere ten feet high. And, sure enough, one night the monster made its appearance, was pursued, scuttled up the wall like a . . . well, one supposes, *not* like a wolf . . . an explosion was heard, the unforgettable smell of gunpowder filled the murky night air . . . and here, and there, and over yonder, and in fact, all around: blood. Fragments of flesh—*fresh* flesh . . . And, also, fragments of a French Army uniform. One Sergeant Bertrand, of the 74th Regiment, was tracked down to his bed in the military hospital: seriously wounded.

Let us hear what O'Donnell has to say. "Bertrand freely confessed his guilt, declaring that he was driven to it against his own will by some external force he could not define, and which allowed him no

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peace. He had, he said, in one night exhumed and bitten as many as 15 bodies. He employed no implements, but tore up the soil after the manner of a wild beast, paying no heed to the bruising and laceration of his hands so long as he could get at the dead. He could not describe what his sensations were like when he was thus occupied; he only knew that he was not himself but some ravenous, ferocious animal. He added, that after these nocturnal expeditions he invariably fell into a profound sleep, often before he could get home, and that always, during that sleep, he was conscious of undergoing a peculiar metamorphosis.

". . . he informed the court of inquiry that, as a child, he preferred the company of all kinds of animals to that of his fellow creatures, and that in order to get in close touch with his four-footed friends he used to frequent the most out-of-the-way places—moors, woods, and deserts. He said that it was immediately after one of these excursions that he first experienced the sensation of undergoing some great change in his sleep, and that the following evening, when passing close to a cemetery where the grave-diggers were covering a body that had just been interred, yielding to a sudden impulse, he crept in and watched them.

"A sharp shower of rain interrupting their labors, they went away, leaving their task unfinished. 'At the sight of the coffin,' Bertrand said, 'horrible desires seized me; my head throbbed, my heart palpitated, and had it not been for the timely arrival of friends I should then and there have yielded to my inclinations. From that time forth I was never free—these terrible cravings invariably came on directly after sunset,' "—I am still quoting O'Donnell, mind—

"Medical men who examined Bertrand unanimously gave it as their opinion that he was *sane*, and could only account for his extraordinary nocturnal actions,"—I almost love that phrase, *his extraordinary nocturnal actions*—"could only account for [etc.] by the supposition that he must be the victim of a strange monomania. His companions, with whom he was most popular, all testified to his amiability and lovable disposition. In the end he was sentenced to a year's imprisonment"—one wonders, *on what charge?*—excavating without a license?— "and on his release was never again heard of." "There can be, I think" —this is O'Donnell thinking, not me— "There can be, I think, little doubt, from what he himself said, that he was in reality a werwolf. [O'D. uses this form of the word.] His preference for the society of animals and love of isolated regions: his sudden fallings asleep and sensations of undergoing metamorphosis, though that metamorphosis was spiritual and metaphysical only, which is

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very often the case, all help to substantiate that belief." —In other words, the belief that Bertrand was, really, a werewolf. Well . . .

Things are very seldom simple; and this one is certainly no exception. —However. Why does O'Donnell say that Bertrand's metamorphosis was "spiritual and metaphysical only?" Did not, after all, in O'Donnell's own words, "in the Cemetery of Père La Chaise . . . at night, those in charge declared they saw a strange form, partly human and partly animal, glide about from tomb to tomb . . ."? Well, *sigh* despite what "those in charge declared," the facts were that (a) the footprints found were those of *feet*, human feet, not of paws; and (b) the teethmarks found on (terrible, terrible) the corpses were of human teeth, and not of the fangs of beasts. . . .

I must leave to others the task of analyzing or perhaps psychoanalyzing the mysterious dreams and impulses of Sergeant Bertrand of the 74th Regiment—of which not the least mysterious is how they evidently vanished after the therapy of one year in stir (pokey, the joint, the big house). I will content myself with making one statement of opinion.

The Werewolf of Paris was actually a ghoul.

And with the habits of ghouls and other exempla of depraved appetite, this Adventure does not deal.

Onward, in one way, very far: as far as Siberia . . . but in another way not so far: inasmuch as our travel guide is, once again, none other then the so-called Eliot O'Donnell . . . I say "so-called," because I doubt it may be his real name. What he writes is not blarney, but the stuff written by the sort of people who believe blarney. Why then, am I telling it to you? —because you ought to learn what sort of rubbish and nonsense gets into print and is believed by people, who pass it on to other people. I quoted him in the case of Sergeant Bertrand, which was an actual case, in order to show you the far-from-actual sort of non-facts he deduced from it. But . . . here he is again. I quote: and he's hedging and dodging this time, with such expressions as "so I have been told," and . . . but enough! Why should I begrudge the man a few bucks? He has been dead many years, almost certainly. Perhaps from tasting the ingredients of the pharmaceutical formula he gives for helping to become a werewolf. (I do not give it, because the ingredients contain elements which are certainly harmful and, possibly, fatal: and you can't get them all, anyway. So there.) We are in Siberia, remember?, among one of the native tribes. Someone has swallowed a rather nasty brew, and recited an incantation which concludes: "Touch apply, and I swear that when I die, / When I die, I will serve thee evermore, / Evermore,

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in grey wolf land, cold and raw." Now, anybody who rhymes "evermore" with "raw" deserves, in my opinion, anything that happens.

What happens is as follows: "The trees then begin to rustle, and the wind to moan, and out of the sudden darkness that envelopes everything glows the tall, cylindrical pillar-like phantom of the Unknown, seven or eight feet in height. It . . . assumes the form of a tall, thin monstrosity, half-human and half-animal, grey and nude, with very long arms and legs, and the feet and claws of a wolf. Its head is shaped like that of a wolf, but surrounded with the hair of a woman, that falls about its bare shoulders in . . . ringlets. It has wolf's ears and a wolf's mouth. . . ." Obviously this is the origin of the famous dialogue beginning, "Grandma, what big ears you have!" Ah, you may laugh! But I suggest to you, very seriously, that it may be from just such a legend that the story of Little Red Riding Hood developed. The horrors of one century often become the children's fables of another . . . and so we bid farewell to Eliot O'Donnell, so-called, as the sun sinks slowly in the west. And if the sun were to sink rapidly and in some other direction, that might be so much more interesting.

Well, we have heard legends, fables, traditions—what are the *facts? Are* there any? What does modern science think of all this? Of any of this, for that matter? Modern science does not entirely dismiss all of this quite entirely. It is a fact that there have been, and, by the law of averages, there are, probably, this very day, people who believe that they themselves turn or have been turned into wolves: and to this belief, or should I say "condition," modern science still to some extent applies the very un-modern word, **lycanthropy**— "wolfmanism" —even when the animal thus believed in is not a wolf. Sometimes, modern science acknowledges, there have been people seized with the compulsion to eat human flesh.

There is a book called *The Werewolf Delusion,* by Ian Woodward, published in 1979; and I chanced upon it only *after* I had begun to prepare this Adventure: I find that it confirms, here and there, some opinions of my own; and this will not of course prevent my quoting it. For example, and as follows: "The British anthropologist, Dr. Robert Eisler, in his study of sadism, masochism and lycanthropy, *Man Into Wolf*, explains that 'it is perfectly possible that [Nebuchadnezzar] suffered from a cyclothmic manic-depressive psychosis, the elation of a "Caesarian" megalomania of the divinized world-ruler being succeeded by a depression in which he developed a sense of guilt and responsibility for all the blood shed at his behest and

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wanted to return from the accursed state of a blood-stained predatory werewolf or lion-man to the innocence of the grazing cattle.' " —Got that? That is what one spokesman for modern science has to say about it. Mr. Woodward's comment on this quotation is, "Complex indeed are the ways of lycanthropy." —And, mind you, King Neb merely ate *grass*.

Modern science, however, would point out—and if *it* won't, *I* will!—that the bughouses contain misfortunate and wretched people who believe that they have been turned into *glass,* and live in mortal terror of being broken. But modern science does not believe that they have *been* turned into glass, and neither does it believe that people have been turned, turn, or can turn into wolves. Modern science rejects the most ingenious argument offered in modern times to justify the werewolf delusion, that a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, and a butterfly turns into a caterpillar . . . so why (runs the argument) can't a man turn into a wolf, and a wolf into a man? *Because. That's* why. The caterpillar/butterfly/caterpillar metamorphosis is a cyclical process which occurs infinite numbers of times and has been observed infinite numbers of times. It is the way that *lepidoptera* live and die and multiply. It cannot bear comparison with the notion that a creature of one species (man) can turn into a creature of another species (say, a wolf)—and then turn *back* into the original, and different, species. The *lepidoptera* phenomenon is, among *lepidoptera,* universal. To cite another example, tadpoles *always* turn into frogs . . . unless brought home in jelly jars by little boys, in which cases tadpoles tend to turn instead into *dead* tadpoles . . . a tadpole does not turn into a frog in mid-cycle and then back, shazzam! into a tadpole again. Frogs do not, in the dark of the moon or the full of the moon or even in the honeymoon, metamorphize into lizards—and then back into frogs.

There are, there have been, likely for a while anyway there will continue to be people who think they are becoming wolves or have become wolves . . . and who behave like wolves. It is exactly what Mr. Woodward has termed it: a delusion. And, although Mr. Woodward never says so and indeed gives no evidence of having even thought so, many of the almost universal human notions about the behavior of wolves may be just that. Delusions. Such men as Vilhjamur Steffanson and Farley Mowatt, both of whom have been explorers, writers, historians, and close observers of wild life—as well as modern conservationists whose writings I have read but whose names I have not written down—have argued earnestly that it is

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not the nature or practice of wolves to attack human beings, and that, in the (according to them) rare instances that wolves have actually done so, the wolves were rabid. However, Barry Holstun Lopez, in his *Of Wolves and Men*, says that non-rabid wolves have indeed killed people—though very rarely. Hungry, you know.

In the 17th century, modern science, as it then was, prescribed the wearing of a wolfskin a cure for rabies and epilepsy . . . epilepsy, that dread scourge, has been largely held in check in so-called "developed" countries, by the use of a drug called sodium dilantin, and by the further use of phenobarbital. Against rabies we have the Pasteur shots. Against lycanthropy . . . well, I do not know what treatment modern science prescribes . . . if any. Only a few years ago in England a 17-year-old boy, after watching a horror movie, called up a friend by phone at three in the morning and cried out in agony that he was turning into a wolf, that fur was growing and claws developing. Help could not come in time; he stabbed himself to death.

One of the famous cave paintings in Europe shows a man clad in a deerskin, antlers and all: he is, however, standing full erect, and seems, in my opinion, to be executing a sort of dance. Some have explained this painting in terms of were-deerism; more have explained it as a sort of sympathetic magic, such as is employed by many so-called primitive people today: that is, if I dress as a deer, if I go down to where the deer go, if there I behave as a deer, then deer will come there, too: and we can hunt them down and kill and eat them. The painting is, we are told, at least 25,000 years old, so who the hell can *know?*

Werewolf beliefs occur in places where there are wolves; werebears are spoken of, or were, in places where there are or were, bears. In Malaya there are strong beliefs in were-tigers, were-crocodiles, were-sharks. In other areas we hear of were-dolphins, were-manatees, were-jackals, were-hyenas, and so on. We could, probably, study the subject forever; may I suggest that it is natural and indeed inevitable to dream of wild beasts when one has seen or heard of them; may I point out that many so-called primitive peoples often do not distinguish between dreams and reality; may I sum up by suggesting that whereas you and I would say (or, equally possible, refrain from saying), "Last night I dreamed I was a wolf and that I went racing and chasing and killed and ate sheep and goats and even people . . . but it was only a dream"; that less-sophisticated peoples would say, or, equally possible, would refrain from saying, "Last night I *turned into a wolf* . . ." and so on, and all the rest of

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it. Beliefs are as contagious as diseases.

As to why, however, of all the legends of were-animals, that of the werewolf seems pre-eminent . . . at least in Europe, to whose culture we are most attuned . . . it has been said, and often, that in times before times before artificial light, mankind was afraid of the dark, not alone when as children, but always . . . that the wind seems to howl more fearfully at night than in daylight . . . and that the howling of the wind reminded our forefathers and foremothers of the howling of wolves. *Grandma, what big* ***teeth*** *you have!—The better to* ***eat*** *you with, my dear!*

Now there is another aspect to sympathetic magic, and it goes like *this:* Say, wouldn't it be nice to be as strong as a lion? The lion eats *me,* why shouldn't I eat the lion? Or, anyway, part of one . . . Then I'll be strong, too . . . And if I wear a lion's skin, oh, wow! I might become as strong as a lion *that* way, too . . . or the skin of, hm, a *wolf!* . . . or, even bigger and hence even better, of a *bear!* I've mentioned beliefs in werebears. There is a word commonly called **buh-*zurk!*** "He had only two beers, boy, and, boy! he went buh-**zurk!**" You all know the word; pronounce it rather more as it is spelled: **berserk . . .** or, **bersark . . .** or, **bear-sark. . . .** or, going back a bit farther to the meaning of the second syllable, **sark** as a shirt or garment . . . **bear-*hide,*** do you get it now? The Viking warriors wore shirts or robes of bear-skin . . . and, probably after a little sympathetic magic and maybe a lot of mead and ale . . . just before a battle, mother, they became raging mad, and . . . or seemed to be . . . as strong as bears. . . . They worked themselves up, in other words . . . and, in other words, they believed, in a way, that, in a way, they were turning into bears. How could their puny enemies stand before them?

But it may not be amiss to insert here a rather significant passage from an old acquaintance whose writings are so rich in significant passages that perhaps I should list him as a collaborator. I refer of course to Pliny the Elder. My quotation here is not direct; it is from a very interesting book entitled *Unnatural History / An Illustrated Bestiary,* by Colin Clair (New York, Abelard-Schuman, 1967). Let me give the whole passage:

> Pliny tells us that the head of the bear is its weakest part, and that many were killed in the Roman arena by a blow on the head with a fist. "The people of Spain," he writes, "have a belief that there is some kind of magical poison in the brain of the bear, and therefore burn the heads of those that have been

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killed in their public games; for it is averred that the brain, when mixed with drink, *produces in man a rage identical* with that of the bear."

Well! This is certainly the legendary berserk madness, is it not? It is a long way from Spain to Scandinavia, but legend is longer than any number of geographical miles. It is more logical to believe that the "rage . . . of the bear" has its origin in the bear's brain than in the bear's skin (or sark), but it is perhaps easier to keep a bear's skin than a bear's brain around—what do I mean, *perhaps?* And, "a blow on the head with a fist" or not, it has generally been easier to kill a wolf than a bear; wolves were more numerous in settled parts than bears (very likely in *un*settled parts as well): hence, it may be, the reason for there being more werewolf than were-bear stories married In China and Japan, where large wild animals were killed off longer ago than in most places, the small fox does duty for the wolf . . . in fact, in England, the silly sport of fox-hunting—"The unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable," Oscar Wilde is said to have called it—in England, I say, once there were no more wolves to hunt, the fox became a substitute. In China and Japan, I say, the legends are of the were-fox . . . in fact, **"fox"** is often synonymous with **"witch."** Many a man in many an old oriental story married a mysterious and of course beautiful woman (somehow no man seems ever to have married a mysterious and *ugly* woman . . . have you noticed? Of course, plenty of men have married non-mysterious and ugly women, and that is why we see so many ugly men around) . . . only to find, by and by, that she turned at intervals into a fox. Now this is bloodchilling, but it is not, in the physical, as distinct from metaphysical sense, as terrifying as if she had turned into a wolf. Because it's rather hard to make up stories about masses of people being murdered by foxes.

One type of metamorphosis of which we hear and read—and, I suppose, though no social introductions have ever been made on my behalf—which we may meet—is the change of man into woman and of woman into man: but this belongs to the realm of surgery . . . and, of course, psychiatry. I merely mention this in passing, and make no further comment on this modern metamorphosis.

I did begin this fascinating Adventure with a quotation of a man-into-bird story . . . the bird was, you will recall—I *hope* you will recall—the stork. A were-stork? yes: a were-stork. More familiar to us, because of the beautiful ballet based upon it, is the legend of the were-swan, or swan-maiden. *Swan Lake.* I saw it twice, both times

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in London, it just happened so; I would have gone, I suppose, if some other ballet had been playing, and not even because I am such a, or much of a, ballet fan. It was night and I wanted something to *do;* and, in one instance, the only immediate alternative was to be swept up in crowds of red-faced, beery soccer fans who had come down from the North of England to cheer their team, whichever team it was. Not Yale I suppose. They were all wearing funny straw hats, although it was winter . . . in *Lon-don* . . . coldest damned winter I ever spent. I believe the theater was in the Strand, romantic-sounding street; but the theater itself was not romantic and did not seem to have been cleaned up since Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Visible puffs of dust arose from the stage at each exquisite dance-step: The other *Swan Lake* which I saw was at, I think, the Old Vic, which had been spiffed-up all new. I suppose you all know what may be termed, I suppose, the *plot*—

So I shall quote from Frank Hamel again, and, by the way, and speaking of transsexual metamorphosis, which I said I wouldn't, Frank Hamel was a woman. A regular woman. It was said that her mother had wanted a boy. The practice of giving girls boys' names continues; but, I am not sure why, it never goes the other way around . . . *does* it?

Here is Frank Hamel speaking: "The swan-maidens . . . have a shirt made of swan's feathers which acts much in the same manner as the wolf-skin to the wer-wolf [sic]. The swan-maiden retains human shape as long as she is kept away from her feather tunic. The commonest form of this legend is that of a man who passes by the lake and sees several beautiful maidens bathing, their feather-dresses lying on the bank. He approaches quietly and steals one of the dresses. In due course the bathers come to the shore, don their dresses, and swim off in the shape of swans, all but one, who is left lamenting on the shore. Then the thief appears, tells her what he has done, and bids the maiden marry him. They live happily together until one day when the husband, by accident, leaves the wardrobe door unlocked and the swan-maiden puts on her feather-shirt and flies off, never to return."

(Does this not, when we recall the death of the swan-maiden in the ballet, recall to you the lines of the old song sung so beautifully by Joan Baez, *I am a man upon the land, / I am a seal upon the sea, / And when I'm far and far frae land, / My home it is in Sule Skerrie. . . .* ? It does to me.) Frank Hamel goes on and says, "The primitive idea at the root of all these stories is that the human soul, in passing from one shape to another, has to wear the outer sign or

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garment" —or *skin*—"of the creature it desires to imitate. The symbolic difference between the wer-wolf [sic] and the swan-maiden is that the former represents the rough, howling, and destructive night-wind; the latter the fleecy, pure and enthralling summer cloud."—Well, that's *one* explanation. And when all other explanations have been given, there is yet one more explanation to be given, and that is the world-wide and eternal love for a good story.

(By the way, it is fairly a story unto itself, and a fairy-story, too, that swans are all fluffy-white and sweet and pure. I have often seen them, in the past, squatting like *pigs* in mud-flats of the River Thames at low tide; and it is a fact that the he-swan is fully capable of running down a full-grown man and breaking his leg with one blow of one of those powerful wings. So let's hear no snickers or reproaches about Leda, in the story of Leda and the swan . . . which was, of course, Zeus (or Jupiter). This by the way is a fascinating story all by itself, but I shall eschew it as a subject until the authorities get their act together and agree as to how many eggs Leda laid, and who hatched out of which . . . and with whom. *One* of the hatchlings was of course Helen of Troy. Mightn't that explain a lot?)

Here's a little story-tale out of the Grimm . . . no, not the fairy-tales, the *Teutonic Mythology*. I am quoting from memory. A young girl walking along the bank of a stream came upon a handsome boy. Somehow or other, he got his belt around the two of them and persuaded her to rub his head, which friction (says old Grimm) caused him to fall asleep. "*Rub his head,*" indeed! *We* know what friction made him sleepy! Though, evidently, she woke up first, unbuckled the belt, and commented to another woman who chanced—just chanced—to come along right just then, "Hasn't he lovely lips?" But the older woman saw something more than that. "Never mind his lips!" cried she. "Look at his *teeth!* He's got *fish's* teeth! He must be a nixy!" And with that, the lad woke up and in a flash jumped into the stream, turning into a fish as he did so. —Watch out, girls! I am not too sure what a nixy, or nick, or, even, believe it or not, a "neck" is . . . a nixy sounds somewhat like pixy. But, the point is: a were-*fish!* Is nothing sacred from this vile lycanthropy, even in the non-lupine form? Evidently not. Remember poor old Tiresias?

Tiresias, a Theban sage—there are several, at least, versions of this story, and I tell it as I recall it being told by my—alas—late friend, Richard McKenna, author of *The Sand Pebbles*—Tiresias, a Theban sage, was out walking one day and happened upon two snakes, who were mating. *I* would have remembered an important appointment elsewhere, but Tiresias struck them apart with his

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staff. Maybe he thought there were enough snakes. For his impertinent interference with the balance of nature, he was changed into a woman. I believe he was supposed to have spent seven years in such form, and was then asked to decide between Zeus and Hēra (the famously jealous *Mrs.* Zeus) a rather nice point, *which* sex derives more pleasure from the sacred act of love. Tiresias, who after all, knew at least something of what he was talking about, said that women did. And, although nobody had asked him, added, "Nine to one." Hēra (or Juno, if you prefer; it's all the same to me) was really pissed at that, and changed him back, not only into a man, but into a blind man. And it took seven years more—in this version: remember that there are others—before he came again upon two snakes mating, and accidentally smacked them with his staff again. Thus recovering his sight.

—and there I said I wasn't going to mention intersexual shapeshifting! I had better get back into the safely wholesome subject of werewolves.

—Ah! By the way. I'd mentioned that although the prefix, **wer,** or **were,** is generally derived from an old germanic word akin to the Latin **vir,** meaning *man,* as in *virile;* there is another derivation, and I said I'd get back to it . . . or on to it . . . or, anyway, *to* it. The Roman, or Latin, word for werewolves and suchlike was **versipelli,** and, as I have small Latin and less Greek, speaking with the valor of ignorance I translate **versipelli** as "those who reverse their pelts." Or, skins. An odd thought occurred to me whilst I was reading Marika Kriss's book, *Werewolves, Shapeshifters, and Skinwalkers,* that, considering the fears and terrors of the times, the Boy Who Cried "Wolf" may really have been crying "*Were*wolf" . . . But you needn't believe it. Ms. Kriss says, "And across the ocean to another continent, the Navaho refer to transformation with their word for werewolf which means literally skinwalker." I have read that, in speaking or writing in English, they call this creature a "Navaho wolf." Evidently the belief is, or was till very recently, still current among them: such a person is considered a rather bad character, and is rather feared . . . and at the same time rather envied: is said, for example, to be able to find treasure . . . an element which I don't remember finding in other accounts of were-creatures. Yet the term, skinwalker, reminds me of a song briefly popular when I was young and small, during the 1920s, or at any rate it reminds me of a few lines, that when the weather is hot, *"It ain't no sin / To take off your skin, / and dance around in your bones. . . ."*

Among the multitude of explanations for the were-legends is that

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it originated with the so-called wolf-children, that is, children supposedly raised by animals of one sort or another, and who retained much if not all of their animal characteristics even when returned to human custody—although this last seems not to form a part of the best-known such legend, that of Romulus and Remus. Among the reasons for doubting this explanation are the doubts expressed that any children ever have in fact been raised by animals. It is said that the children found were idiot, or autistic, or in some way defective, and had either wandered away from home or been deliberately abandoned by their parents as useless mouths to feed. The matter, quite apart from possible werewolf associations, remains unsettled. The best-documented story of this type in modern times (and even here the documentation has in some aspects been questioned) is that of the so-called Wolf-girls of India.

Approximately during the latter part of the First World War, or a bit later, a native Indian clergyman of the Anglican Church, a Rev. Mr. Singh, whilst hunting in the region of Midnapure, heard that two small wolf-girls were living with wolves in a den in the jungle not far off. Mr. Singh has written and described how he went to the site and hid there with others and has given rather (to me) persuasive details of how he saw first the she-wolf and then her cubs and two scarcely human or even humanoid creatures come up out of a lair under the the roots of a huge old tree. They were captured, and the two girls lived with Mr. and Mrs. Singh until they died. The story of the capture has in some details been doubted by some; the existence of the girls is past doubt: hundreds of people saw them, Indian, European, American. It seems a fact that they could not speak or walk erect, that they howled at the moon, devoured raw flesh, and all the rest of it. It seems a fact that the one who lived longer had, by the time of her death—perhaps she was then in her mid-teens—learned to walk erect, to eat human food, to speak simply and haltingly, and in general to behave in the manner of a very young, and very *strange,* child. —I should add: there are photographs. If this child was indeed raised by wolves, I do not know. To me the marvel of the story lies not in that possibility so much as in the fact that she was changed from something not far from animality or from severe insanity into a definite humanity: and all this not by magic nor medical science but simply by infinite patience and by infinite love. —Still: there is the story of the Wolf-girls of India. And there are the stories of the werewolves of, well, anywhere.

I'm going to conclude with further references to the quotations from the paraphrases of the words of Mr. Ian Woodward, whose book,

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The Werewolf Delusion, you have heard of in this Adventure before. I have said that I did not come across it until I had already begun, in fact, gotten rather well into, my work on this Adventure. To a large extent I find him a most unsatisfactory author. At times he seems almost more credulous than the incredibly credulous Mr. Eliot O'Donnell, whom he quotes, by the way, as an excellent authority. Woodward, to be sure, denies the actual existence of traditional werewolves; he believes, though, that some might have been possessed by demons, or that projections of astral bodies were seized upon by evil elementals; and so on. He objects to werewolf movies as being insufficiently accurate. And so on. In short, I did rather sneer and jeer at him. *And then he caught and held me!* It was like walking briskly and carefree into a stone wall and being thrown backwards and down. I am absolutely sure that he has gotten hold of *facts* in one chapter of his book; and if he reasoned it out all by himself or abstracted it from others, I neither know nor much care: I got it from Woodward, and to Woodward, for my part, belongs the credit. Listen:

> He looked like a scared animal. He foamed at the mouth, he screamed uncontrollably . . . he bit a woman. . . it took five strong men to get him up, so immense was his strength. [He suffered from] inordinate thirst . . . mental derangement . . . he made] an hysterical barking sound. . . .

And so on. In full, horrible details. Was Woodward referring to medieval accounts of a captured werewolf? He could have been. Such accounts exist and some are dreadfully similar. But in fact he was not. He was referring to a man who died in a hospital in England in the year 1976. Of what cause? Of rabies.

We have spoken of possible sources of the werewolf and of other were-creature legends. We have assigned the sources of such legends to the dreams of primitive peoples, to totemism, to sympathetic magic, to myth, to outcast children raised by beasts, to delusion, to insanity; to who-knows-how-many other sources this frightful fable has been assigned. And, *in part,* such assignments may be right. But I am now fully convinced that the prime source, as far as the actual were*wolf* is concerned, lies elsewhere. Recollect that I have quoted safe and sound modern authorities who have denied that real wolves ever really attack human beings . . . with the sole likely

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exception, they acknowledge, of *rabid* wolves. Suppose a man living five hundred years ago in a world full of darkness and superstition to have been attacked and bitten by a wolf, perhaps one he tried to drive off from his sheep—a wolf so much fiercer than any other wolf that the incident could not be forgotten. Some time later the man himself—a peasant near a forest, let us say—begins himself to act like a wolf. Like an abnormal wolf. He attacks little children, perhaps even his own, and kills and tears them apart. He howls. He runs away and hides in the forest. Captured, he is fearfully, insanely strong. *He is as strong as a wolf! He—* But enough. And yet: *not* enough. Listen to Woodward:

> Historial documentation shows that the incidence of rabies rises and falls in cycles of roughly one hundred years, a century of epidemic being separated by a century of relative calm. We are now living at a time when the disease is rapidly building up to explosive proportions. A conservative estimate of worldwide deaths from rabies today is thirty thousand, of which India alone accounts for half this figure. Rabies was certainly raging in the Middle Ages, especially between 1500 and 1600—and so, of course, was werewolfery; and although foxes, badgers*, bears and other animals were also affected, people most feared rabid wolves (not that the country people necessarily *knew* they were rabid) because of the sheer savagery and unpredictable nature of their character. A great many of the reported werewolves were undoubtedly rabid wolves: sufficient in number (as indeed were their rabid human victims) to sow the seed for many a good werewolf story.

And he goes on to name areas in Europe where werewolfery was epidemic and rabies now is—let us remember the Mexican legends of *naguales,* or were-coyotes, and let us remember, if indeed we ever forget, that rabies seems now epidemic in Mexico, right across the Rio Grande from Texas . . . and that rabid animals have been crossing the Rio into the States more and more, and then he, Ian Woodward, concludes his chapter with these words:

> . . . I have no doubt that, because of the shared symptoms, a vast proportion of history's dreaded "werewolves" were in fact

*In Japanese folk-belief the badger as well as the fox was a witch-animal.

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either rabid wolves or their rabid human victims. The facts seem to speak for themselves.

Alas and woe! Indeed they do. . . .

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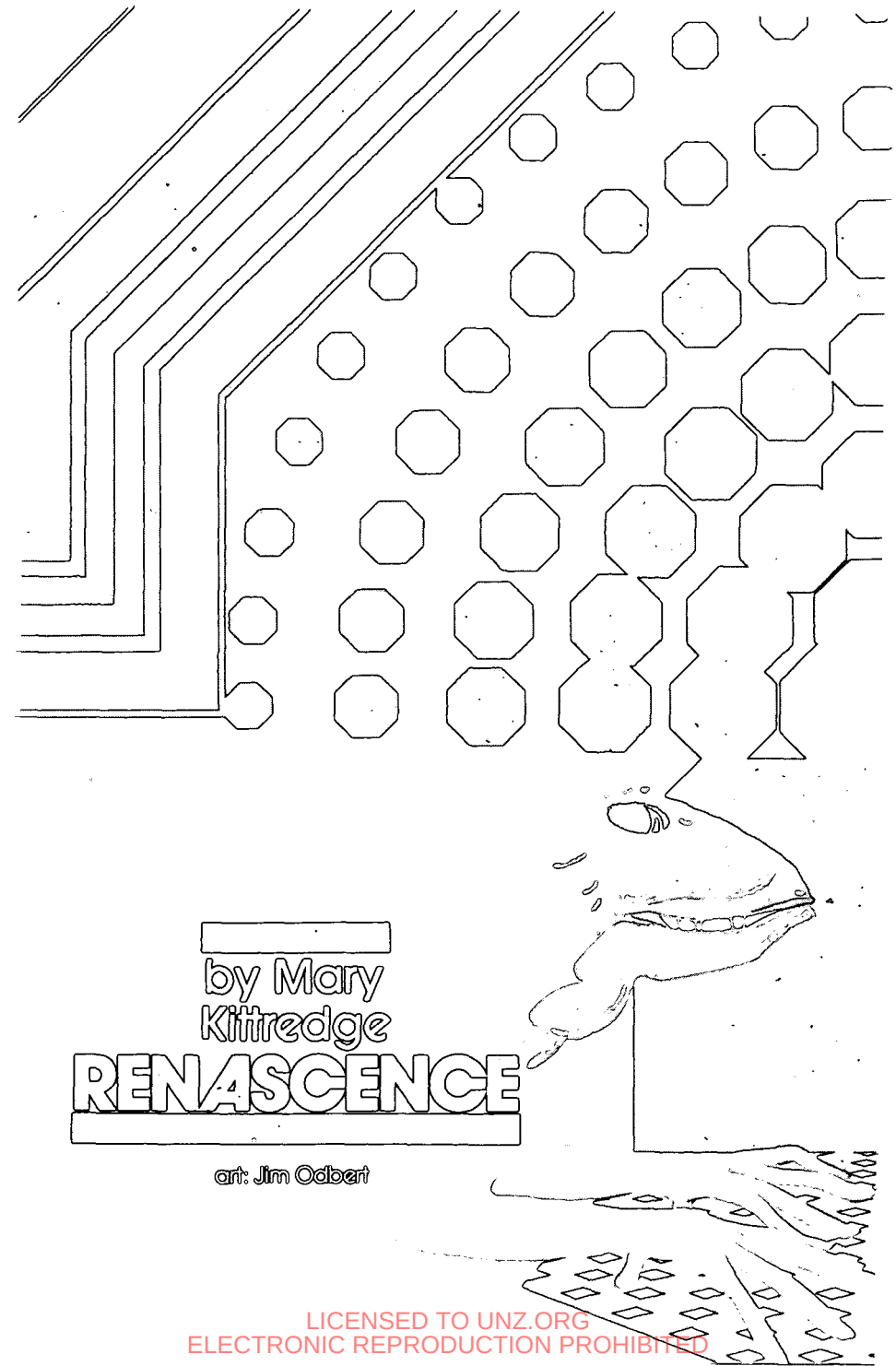

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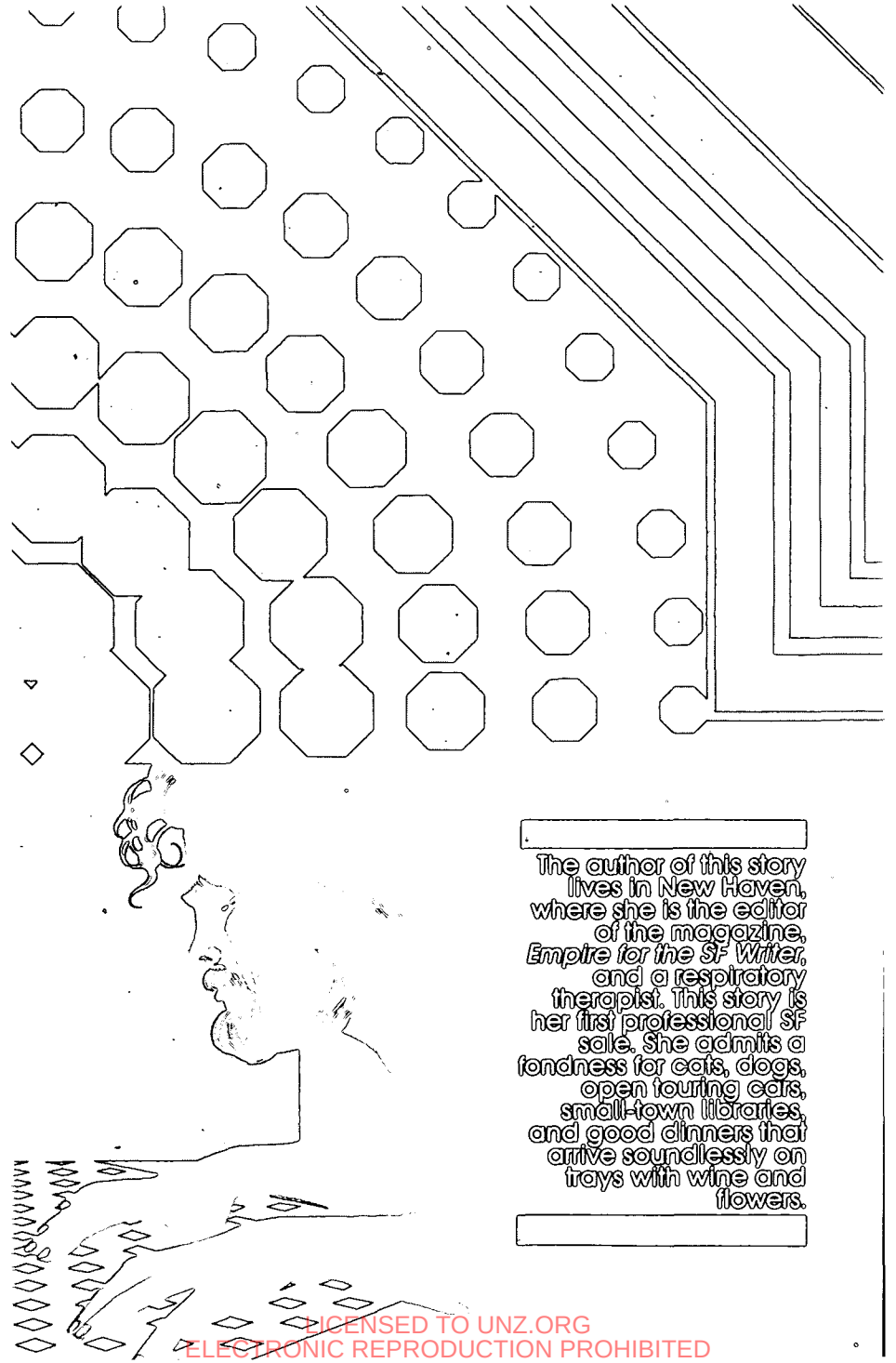

The author of this story lives in New Haven, where she is the editor of the magazine, *Empire for the SF Writer*, and a respiratory therapist. This story is her first professional SF sale. She admits a fondness for cats, dogs, open touring cars, small-town libraries, and good dinners that arrive soundlessly on trays with wine and flowers.

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Over the rattle of bare branches clicking together like bones in the night wind, they heard the sound: something nearby, in the brush. Scripps jerked upright, his eyes moving first to the others around the small campfire. *All there.* They were not, then, about to be ambushed by one of their own. Still, the thought did not shame him, for in his quick head-count his glance had met that of each other man, checking for him.

A stick snapped; then the rustle again, nearer. Women reached silently out for their children, to draw them close under their rough shawls. The men half-rose. Scripps reached for Joey, who sat as if frozen, small fists clenched and eyes wide with fright.

Then Scripps froze, too.

The dark hound-shape paused at the clearing's edge, challenging, growling from deep in its chest. Shadows slunk close behind it: a stray-pack. The creature snarled, eyes glowing blood-red by firelight. It took one more stiff-legged, meaningful step. Then it sprang.

It screamed, and seemed for an instant to hang there, straddling firelight, its jaws slashing air. Then it fell with a thud, and its claws scrabbled trails in the dust. A last shudder went through it, and it was still. Foam gathered on its slack muzzle.

Calmly, the man nearest Scripps pushed his slingshot back into his belt. His knife glinting, he bent to the dog; soon its carcass was gutted and bled, and hung by noosed hind legs. Nudged by the wind, it swayed gently back and forth at the end of its rope.

Later, Scripps stared at the dog as he sat through his watch. The rope twined and untwined, and with each turn the creature strafed Scripps with its sightless eyes. Mangy and half-starved, as food it was hardly worth dressing out. Still, it looked right hanging over fifteen desperate refugees. Scripps thought it made a most appropriate flag.

Fifteen yards off in the darkness, he knew, lay a set of rails stretching away towards the city. He watched, but saw only a sliver of moon like an icicle in the low branches. Straining his ears, he heard only the wind's mocking whistle.

The train would not whistle. The train, he began to fear, would never come. After all, he thought, sitting there stiff on a tree-stump, what proof did he have that it would? Just a rumor, a bought one at that. The same tip, he supposed, that had brought all these others to camp here two nights in the cold.

He moved onto the ground, leaned his back up against the stump's rough bark. No train. Well, tomorrow they would start to walk. The path, at least, was clearly marked. Scripps smiled to himself, grimly.

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He would make it. He would.

But now he was tired. His eyes burned, and the ache in the back of his neck felt like a hammer-blow. Shifting, he pulled his coat tighter. The darkness was thick as a blanket. He rested his eyes.

"Scripps!"

He leapt awake in an explosion of panic, threw off whatever had seized his arm—

"Scripps, it's here! The train, hurry!" Joey tugged at him, terrier-fashion, staggering under the weight of both their packs. "Come *on!*"

The clearing was empty. Alert now, Scripps grabbed a pack, hustled himself and the boy towards the dull yellow glow of a kerosene lantern. Behind it a huge dark shape loomed on the tracks, chuffing steam.

Only the desperate ventured onto the night-trains. All black, they rolled in darkness like gypsy caravans, hitched to the infrequent, unscheduled freights that still hauled to the city. The city was dying; still, Scripps headed into it. Little remained in the world to be desperate for, save the chance of escape. It was there, in the city. Inside.

Aching, Scripps shifted restlessly, his tailbone already scraped raw by the hard wooden seat. The rough bench was a prize; half the passengers squatted or sprawled in the car's narrow aisle. Scripps sighed, shifted again, leaning on his pack. In the murky light of a single lantern, the other riders dozed or stared dully ahead, swaying with each monotonous lurch of the train.

Suddenly, Scripps felt eyes on him. He took a deep breath, let his glance travel over the dull, brutish faces until he reached one that was not dull. Perhaps seventeen, wiry, rat-faced, with bright calculating eyes fixed on Scripps's shoulder, the boy did not lower his gaze. He looked . . . hungry.

Scripps gave no sign, let his glance move on. Meanwhile he scratched at his shoulder as if at a flea-bite, and managed to cover the bright player's emblem stitched to his right sleeve. *Careless, careless again.* He was not in the mood to fight punks, nor to fend off their pitiful offerings once they were beaten. *No more.* He tried for what seemed the hundredth time to find a position that did not cramp his muscles. The chunk-ka-chunk of metal wheels, beaten out of round by the decaying railbed, jolted up through the floorboards and into his bones.

In the aisle at the head of the car a guard squatted, shoving chunks of dark bread into his mouth. In his lap lay a rifle; behind him a

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padlock beat out a tattoo on the chained door. All at once he howled, spattering crumbs; the hard crust fell to the floor. Two men dove at it. Clutching his jaw, the guard jerked his gun sharply; the men backed away.

The guard grinned and snatched up a jug from the heaped pile of booty before him. His fares for the trip:

Candles, pickaxe, a coil of rope. Three logs, a propane torch, bundles of dogskins. Some pills, perhaps morphine or antibiotics. Shoes, blankets. And Scripps's fare: a gallon of two-year-old blackberry wine.

Scripps felt dry. He'd kept back just enough for the trip; now he rummaged his pack for the canteen. The wine was smooth, potent as sherry. It tasted of sunshine, and summers long past when he and Bozzie (Bozzie the big brother, Bozzie the golden) would sneak behind the tool shed with a bottle stolen from the old man's maturing stock. Unaged, it tasted like cat piss, but they drank it anyway, to get drunk and to infuriate the old man.

A little warning sounded inside Scripps's head. (Bozzie the golden, Bozzie the gone.) He had a sudden vision of the wasps that clustered, buzzing, on the bottle in pale sunlight like champagne. Then his mind's eye saw Bozzie grown up, drunken, desperate, his thin face awash in the light of a trash-barrel fire. (Bozzie the gone.)

No. Scripps squirmed, took a swallow of wine, but the lump in his throat stayed. Then beside him a small, saving voice muttered sleepily.

"Wanta drink."

Joey had slept almost all the way; now he peered owlishly up from the bed Scripps had made of their sleeping-rolls. Scripps bent and poured the boy's mouth full of wine.

Joey swallowed and smacked his lips, smiling. "More."

"No, no more." Scripps capped the canteen and stuffed it away. "We're almost there."

Joey sat up, yawning hugely, rubbing his eyes with his small fists. Dark keloids, scars of his life before Scripps had found him, marked his mahogany skin. "Where we now?" he demanded.

In the grey dawn, the ruined world jerked by like cheap film unreeling, through wire-mesh-reinforced windows pockmarked by snipers. Some of the holes were fresh, still dribbling greenish pellets of glass. As they passed the dark tenements, Scripps thought he glimpsed a shape skittering into the shadows. He turned from the window.

"*They* here?" asked Joey, his small brown face pinched.

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"No. Only Inside," Scripps said.

They. In that special, separate tone, it did not need explaining. They had come in their ships, before Scripps had been born, when the world was full of people, near-empty of food. From his pack Scripps drew a plastic-sealed news clipping, yellowed but legible: President Greets Visitors. He stared at it, knowing the story was true, but unable to make much sense of the blurry photograph. He knew that compared to now, food had been plentiful even then; still, what this picture showed went against all his instincts. In it, someone called President Smith stood beside one of them. Although what *it* did could not really be called standing, its pose was reasonable-looking compared to the President's. He was offering food—something rather improbably called a "hot dog." Scripps wondered what kind of dog was that small; perhaps it was only a part of one.

The boy across the car had lost interest in Scripps; he stared now at the guard, who was chomping the bread again. Crumbs rolled out of his mouth and lodged in his beard. Every roll of his jaws was a taunt. I have this food, his expression said, and not one of you dares take it from me.

Scripps looked at the news-clip again. In it, a man freely offered his food to an alien. In it, the alien offered the Game in return. The board lay on a table between the two beings, its glow clearly visible even in this muddy photograph. Scripps tucked the clipping back into his pack, where his own game-board nestled.

They'd brought nothing more. Earth's hopes for last-minute rescue had been in vain. *They* had scattered the game-boards and offered the ultimate prize. For a while, people flocked to the tournaments. Then, as the number of applicants dwindled until for two years in a row there were no contests, they vanished Inside, retreating to wait. For what, no one knew.

Inside was paradise; everyone knew that. The best of the players had gone there forever, escaping a world that grew meaner and darker each day. Stories spread: marble halls lighted by magic, jewelled robes that warmed or cooled at the mere touch of the skin, ambrosia that came from the stars. There was music Inside, ease and laughter among the most gifted, and some even said immortality.

Joey's green eyes watched Scripps gravely. "I don't want to go," he said.

"I know. I know you don't. But we can't stay out here. You know that, don't you?" Scripps laid a hand on the boy's skinny shoulder, drew back as the child flinched. *I ain't no dog*, Joey's look said.

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"Anyway. Anyway, we'll be all right," Scripps said lamely.

"Uh-huh." Whatever childish faith Joey might have had was long gone by the time Scripps had found him, sick and starving, covered with weeping sores. It had taken a whole day to coax him with spoonfuls of soup from the basement where Scripps had gone scavenging. Now, a year later, he still felt that Joey was more wolverine than small boy. *At least he doesn't bite anymore*, Scripps thought, remembering Joey's bloody first bath. Beneath them, the train lurched bone-jarringly over a switch, and suddenly night fell again. They were inside the tunnel.

The rank, choking odor of coal fumes seeped into the car. Scripps's eyes burned. Not much longer, though, for very soon they would reach Grand Central Station, or whatever was left of it. Scripps wondered what they would find.

Then the hackle-raising shriek of the train's brakes ripped through the dark; the engine groaned, halted. A split second later the hitch-hiking, freewheeling night train slammed into the freight's rear.

Scripps raised his head, setting off brilliant concussions of pain. In his mouth blood welled up, warm and coppery-sweet. He gagged, coughed, spat a tooth. Splinters needled his hands and knees as he pushed himself up off the floor, seeing stars. Somewhere, a man cursed; a woman prayed loudly. From somewhere else gurgled a wordless sound Scripps did not want to identify.

Joey. His heart took a horrid swoop. "Joey?" Icicle terror rammed through him. "*Joey!*"

Then Joey whimpered, and Scripps's world came tiltingly upright. He reached down, grabbed onto a portion of boy, and pulled hard.

Joey slid up beside him. "Don't want to," he protested, wriggling away. Roughly, Scripps yanked him back. Up front, as shock dissolved, screaming began, hoarse monotonous howls that must echo for hundreds of yards in the darkness outside. Like a dinner-bell, Scripps thought—shut up, shut *up*—as he tore at his pack with skinned, throbbing fingers. By now in their lairs tunnel-dwellers were stirring, nostrils twitching, ears pricked at the sound of an easy kill.

Calling all ghouls, Scripps thought grimly, remembering the tenement-shadows outside. They'd be here in just seconds, unless the guard managed to find his gun, silence his cargo. Around Scripps fear billowed like blood in shark waters.

The pack opened, Scripps uncased the game-board and slapped it

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over his knees. Then he grabbed Joey's hands. "Don't think. Play," he ordered.

In the darkness the board glimmered faintly, pastel crystal matrices awaiting a touch—rather, two touches. His, and the boy's. It took two minds, four hands, to make what they needed now, two singers to sing the one song that might save them. Still whimpering, Joey allowed his small hands to be pressed to the octagon-board. A faint ping! rang up from the prism-scape; instantly, flickering light spread like wildfire from crystal to crystal, until the board shone with pale fire.

In the pastel glow, Joey's face floated as if disembodied; tears flashed in his tightly curled lashes. "Joey," Scripps whispered, "Joey, *play*."

Then a thin, fluting song trembled out of the prisms, a goblin-tune, haunting and sweet. The board warmed to Scripps's touch; a faint tingling spread through his hands, and the nape of his neck prickled.

"Player," said someone nearby in hoarse tones of relief. "There's a player here." Murmuring spread through the dark car.

There are two players here, Scripps thought proudly, as his hands moved with Joey's in silhouette over the deepening crystal-hues, ruby and gold, emerald, aquamarine. Joey's face smoothed to dreamy intentness. The song twined up. Scripps looked into the boy's face and felt himself falling.

Falling. The screams stopped. Music . . . laughed. Things from the boy's mind crept, tendril-like, into Scripps' own. His hands moved, drawn by the song, on the hundred-and-sixty-four faceted crystals set into their carved slots.

It was a sensation he could never be prepared for, the feeling of knowing what Joey knew, in exactly the way that Joey knew it. Scripps felt Joey's springy resilience, his fear, his simple intention to survive. Then particular things began seeping through: hunger, thirst, along with reluctance to bother him, Scripps, with these things. For a startling instant Scripps's own face as seen through the boy's eyes rose up. Then with a deft maneuver the boy took control, led them into a melody, stated, inverted, reversed and restated it. His laughter flowed through, tickling Scripps. The song held. *Scripps*, thought Joey. The word was clear, mischievous. *Scripps, play*.

Unmeasured time later, Scripps felt the car lurch, roll forward. Inside: silence, the music invading and tranquilizing. Outside, no shape moved. The game-crystals, glowing like embers, maintained

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fragile peace among those who heard Game played according to Joey.

At the platform, a dozen or so furtive bandits unloaded the freight. Scripps saw labels on cases of canned goods. Apparently the city's stores were finally exhausted, and the looters had to move farther afield. Which would leave, Scripps reflected, much less for the people still out there. The rat-boy from the train scuttled furtively towards him. Scripps turned away.

"Please, sir . . ."

Scripps stiffened. Always the same voice, the whining, demanding tone. Whirling, he faced the boy.

"I'm not the one. You're mistaken."

The boy eyed him, slyness distorting his features. "I'm nice," he said softly.

Scripps pushed him hard.

Outside, he shivered resentfully. It was a crisp, razor-bright fall day, air carbonated with sunshine and laden with promise of early pneumonia. Beside him, Joey caught his breath, nostrils flaring, chest heaving. Fear stabbed Scripps. Beneath that small, tough-looking frame pumped a pair of lungs shredding like wet tissue, slowly, each time a snow fell. *Simple*, Scripps thought. *Inside, or we're both dead by spring.*

Joey sneezed.

"Come on," Scripps said. They walked on a street paved with broken glass. Silent buildings watched down, their intact upper windows reflecting the sky. The watched feeling was not an illusion, Scripps knew, for the glare of the solar collectors showed over the roof-edges. Up there, small crops flourished, grown with the same jealous fervor once given to stock portfolios. His neck prickled with the primitive awareness of a rifle-scope trained on his spinal-cord, and he thought of exposing his player's patch. But no; a rifle could capture as well as defend. They walked on.

From the gutter beside a cracked fire-hydrant, something grinned toothily: dog, Scripps decided. Picked clean, the skull gleamed. Joey reached for his hand. The glass-fragments crunched loudly beneath their feet in the bright morning. Making their way between ruins of cars, past the overturned trucks and the looted stores, they headed for what had been Central Park, and was now Inside.

They were not to blame, Scripps thought. They had come at the end, nearly. Patiently, they watched and waited, Inside, with all the time there was, all the time in the world.

"Hey," said Joey. Without warning they came on it, no-man's-

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land, where concrete gave way to packed earth and buildings to nothing. Or almost to nothing.

Hovels of sheet-iron and broken boards hunkered around smoking barrels. The air here was tinged with a faint stink of carrion. Here stank of death. Joey tugged at Scripps's hand. "Hey, let's go."

Scripps heard him dimly, staring beyond to a white glimmer hanging mirage-like just on the horizon. Inside. His heart beat faster; then nearby movement distracted him.

From a board hut, a hunched-over shape struggled into the sun. Man or woman, he could not tell. Feet wrapped in rags, indescribably filthy, it shuffled towards the fire. From the smoke-belching barrel it pulled something long, something crusted with . . . Scripps felt his gorge rise. The creature squatted, began to eat, whining.

Scripps vomited.

The thing paused, looked towards them. High, dismal wails came from its mouth. There was a rustling, shuffling sound; from the cardboard and tarpaper caves creatures poured into daylight. Swaying and moaning, they shambled towards Scripps.

Scripps grabbed Joey and ran. Holding tight, he pinned Joey's wild arms with his own, felt the boy's sobbing harsh on his neck. Horrid fingers plucked, tore at their clothing and snatched at their hair. Something fixed itself onto Scripps's back, crooning. Scripps nearly gagged on the stench of its breath.

"Hung-gree-e-e, gim-m-ee, ple-e-eze . . ."

Scripps kicked viciously backwards; the thing howled and fell. Stumbling, breath coming now in huge tearing sobs, he staggered on. Still his flesh crept with their hands touching, touching. . . .

And then they were free. The things had no strength for a chase. A few last ones stood watching them balefully, heads swaying sideways, like hopeless dumb animals. In his mind's eye Scripps saw the long bone again, and he held Joey tight. "Ssh, they're gone, they won't hurt you," he lied. Joey clutched him and cried harder.

All around lay a grey ash, inches deep, drifting and settling with the little cold gusts of wind. Overhead, clouds gathered; sunlight came slantingly, then disappeared. Joey snuffled, wiggled to be let down. Jesus, Scripps thought. Jesus, they almost got us.

"What were they gonna do to us?" Joey demanded, his voice still wavering on the edge of tears. Scripps crouched before him, first glancing back to be sure they were not being followed after all.

"Joey, they were just people. Sick, sad, poor people. They wanted us to help them, but we can't because we don't have anything, either."

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Joey listened, looking back at the settlement, thoughts moving visibly in his head. "Like me," he said finally.

"What?" Scripps said, startled.

"Like me, when you found me." Joey regarded him patiently, as if he were the adult and Scripps the child.

"Well, not quite," he said at last. Fat drops were falling now, making small dark holes in the dust. "Look," he said.

Ahead a white glimmering hung on the horizon, no longer mirage-like but clearly real, beckoning, precisely where the story-tellers had said it would be. Around it, what had been Central Park was a desert of ash and blackened tree-stumps, memorializing the fire-fights of the last food wars.

Inside. Scripps cinched up his pack. They would make it now, he was sure. Looking back once as they trudged through the soft grey dust, he saw that the wind was taking their footprints as they stepped out of them.

They walked steadily, and the sky grew steadily darker, the drizzle more chilling. Joey spoke after a long time.

"Hey, remember them little meats we got that time? Back home, we played for them people, and they gave us—"

Scripps remembered. The meat had been dog, the offering of people even more miserable than himself, in return for an hour of game-induced tranquility. *No more*, he told himself, setting his jaw grimly as he marched.

"An we cooked 'em over that fire Bozzie made," Joey went on. "Mmmm, I wonder what ol' Bozzie doin' now."

Fire of books, Scripps remembered. He remembered also taking Bozzie away before Joey could see him, what he had become and how he had died. "Listen, forget all that. That's all done." (Bozzie the gone.)

After a while, Joey spoke again. "Scripps, all them people back there."

"Yeah?" Ahead, Inside grew whiter, solider. He was half-listening, intent on calculating the distance that remained. They would make it tonight. He forced himself to walk faster, despite the growing ache in his back and thighs.

"How come nobody saved them poor people?"

"Most people don't get saved." Inside glowed, dome-shaped. "They've got to save themselves, pull themselves up by their boot-straps, like us."

The night thickened around them. Joey said, "Scripps. Them peo-

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ple, they don't need bootstraps. They need food." A long pause, then, "Ain't lucky, them people. They ain't got no Scripps."

Scripps looked down in surprise, but the child said no more, just kept walking.

White and luminous, gleaming in the rain, the wall curved gently away in both directions and up out of sight. It was dark now, and in the wall's pale glow Joey's face showed, exhausted. "Wh-what now?" he said.

"I'm not sure," Scripps admitted. He had imagined some sort of gatekeeper, but there was no gate, or even a door. He looked again at the smooth, seamless wall.

Then it spoke. "Kindly state your reason for wishing entry."

Scripps jumped, moved closer. A speaker of some kind, an intercom? No break showed in the slick surface.

Rain streamed down the boy's face, and his teeth chattered audibly. "*Tell* it," he said.

"I'm here to play the Game," he shouted, wondering if anyone could hear. Then, remembering the formal response, "I wish to challenge a Bothryan Game-player, under the human-player clause. I claim the rights of guardianship for the boy."

The wall said, "Enter." Nothing else happened. After a moment, the wall said again, "Enter."

"Open the door," Scripps called.

"Enter."

"There's *no door*—"

"Enter."

Scripps kicked the wall just as hard as he could, and his foot sailed on through it as if it were vapor. His body sailed after, landing hard on a smooth, slippery floor.

"Joey!" The room was small, dome-shaped, and seamless. It glowed greenly. A small light appeared, like a candle-flame, floating perhaps three feet off the floor.

"Please follow," it said, and its voice was no-voice, featureless like the wall's.

Scripps tried pushing his hand through again, but the wall had solidified. "Joey?"

"Please follow."

Some kind of guide-drone, Scripps decided. It couldn't respond; it could only repeat what it was told to say. They had such things, it was said. The wall, too, must be programmed somehow. Furious, Scripps hammered it with his fists.

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Then a small brown hand poked through. Quickly Scripps seized it, pulled hard, and the rest of the boy popped Inside.

"Joey!" Scripps hugged the boy, pressed his face into the wet, nappy head. "Dammit, stay with me. Don't ever do that again."

Joey squirmed free. "I didn't do nothin'. What's *that?*"

"Please follow."

"Come on. It's some kind of robot, to guide us. It's just a mechanical thing, it can't hear or talk back."

"Incorrect," the light said, and passing through the wall, it disappeared.

At once the room began to darken, their shadows merging with the gloom. Clearly, they were being encouraged to leave. "Hey, Scripps." Joey's voice quavered. "Let's go home."

Scripps swallowed hard. "Too late. We'll be all right." Grasping Joey's hand, Scripps took a step towards the wall, then another, fervently wishing he could see through it before he had to walk through it. Somehow, this was not what he had expected. Squaring his shoulders, he took a deep breath and another step.

"Kindly state your reason for wishing exit."

Scripps pulled his jackknife out of the wall, watched the edges of the gash flow together. In moments, no mark showed. They had been here for hours in this small white room. No windows, no doors, and no hint of what came next . . . *if anything*. . . .

"Kindly state your reason . . ."

"Kindly state *your* reason, dammit, you can't just keep us here—"

"Incorrect."

Scripps clenched his fists as the wall spoke again in its toneless voice. "We do not wish to supervise your actions. We do not wish to take protective measures. You will remain where you are."

"Other humans are here," Scripps objected. "Are they confined?"

"They are initiates. You are not." Now the wall's voice seemed to carry a tinge of scorn.

"Oh, I see. Savages, are we? Aren't you afraid that we'll mess your floor?"

As Scripps spoke, a small section of wall began shimmering, flowed, disappeared. A side-room revealed itself.

"Toilet facilities," said the wall. "Do you wish instructions in their use?"

"Thanks. We'll figure it out."

"Please state your other requirements."

Scripps stiffened. *How about a small thermonuclear warhead?*

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Then from behind him he heard Joey sniffle and gulp back a sob. Slowly, he let his clenched fists fall.

"We're hungry," he said. "We need food, water too." *Please, sir. Please, you arrogant bastard.*

The food arrived through a small dissolvature flush with the gleaming floor: two large basins filled with grey porridgey stuff. There were no spoons. Revolted and starved, Scripps extended his right index finger and dunked it first-knuckle-deep, into the warm greasy mess. Then he drew it back, cautiously sniffing the glob on his fingertip.

His famished body trembled at the stewed-meat aroma. He ate it, and scooped up more, making a spoon between thumb and forefinger. The texture was like cooked barley. But what kind of meat? *I don't care,* he thought, pushing it into his mouth. *I don't care, much.*

The boy watched him, accusingly, Scripps thought. *He'll eat when he's hungry enough.* Scripps drank from the bulb-shaped carafe, letting the cool water slosh in his mouth. He looked up in time to catch Joey swiping away a tear.

"Joey. Come on, you've got to eat."

Joey slid over, peered into the basins, and looked away.

"Hey, you remember the first time I fed you? Like this, with my fingers?"

"Don't want it."

"You didn't want it then, either. Come on," Scripps urged gently. "Eat it for strength." He watched resolution grow in the boy's face, and he knew he must feed it. "Strength," he repeated. "For whatever you want to do."

After a moment Joey opened his mouth and accepted the food. He finished the rest on his own.

Knowing the wall could speak made it seem alive, made it seem to be watching. Scripps swallowed the final mouthful and put his dish down. *Were* they watching? Now that he was full, he had strength for shame. He should have waited, resisted until they were freed, or at least given more explanation. Squarish and thick-walled, the basins resembled troughs.

"Joey. I'm sorry."

With one finger Joey smeared bits of spilled food on the smooth floor. He did not look up.

"It won't always be like this."

Incorrect. Scripps jumped, but the voice had not come from the wall; it was his own thought, inside his own head. *How do you know it won't always be like this?* They had not come back, he realized

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suddenly. No player had ever come back to tell how it was, Inside. Only the stories, repeated until they seemed true, told of richness and splendor. Scripps thought of his father, the old man's descriptions of mosaic floors, painted panels, jewelled robes. But his father had failed, had never progressed past first-level play in the old tournaments. How could his father have known? Why, in fact, would they want such things? *And what could they want with you?* persisted the unwelcome voice in his head.

"You'll see," he told Joey. "After we win, things are going to be different." He hoped he had put enough certainty into his voice.

Joey slept, but Scripps could not sleep. His jaw throbbed from his fall on the train, hours or years ago. The walls stared down, blank and white; silence rang in his ears. Suddenly he wanted badly to scream. It was all a mistake. Everyone knew that Inside meant escape from the hunger and cold, from the brutish thing life outside had become.

Here we are, he thought bitterly. *Warm, safe, and fed.* What he'd eaten was bile at the back of his throat. Joey turned in his sleep, whimpered, grew still again.

Some time later, the wall spoke. "Tomorrow."

Scripps jerked upright, sweating. "Tomorrow *what?*"

There was no answer. After a while he lay back down. Joey edged closer, and Scripps curved an arm round the small trembling shoulders.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be better.

Maybe, he thought.

The warm stew was not nearly so appetizing for breakfast. *Coffee*, Scripps thought. *You'd think they'd have coffee.* Even acorn drippings would go good now. He washed in the cubicle, paused in front of the toilet. Surely this was the toilet? He'd been too unnerved to wonder until now, and as he stared at the flushless foreign-looking receptacle he remembered an old joke and hoped he wasn't meant to wash his feet in it. *Not that he'd had much recent experience with modern plumbing* . . . His stream hit the bowl's waterless side and disappeared with a faint hiss. Imagining himself sliding feet-first into whatever the sewer was, he began to laugh. Then he stopped. It wasn't really funny. He stood there, thinking about how funny it wasn't, until he heard voices. *Voices*. He had a sudden, ridiculous impulse to slam the bathroom door, realized there was no door, and struggled to get himself decently into his pants and zipped. It was a *woman's* voice. . . .

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In the main room, a young woman stood smiling at Joey, who shyly smiled back. She was twenty-five, maybe, with cornsilk hair, a blue dress that hung—*tenderly*, Scripps thought, and realized that even at first glance he could imagine her being touched in no other way. Her skin was pale, translucent as a skim of ice. Blue veins showed in her wrist when she held out her hand.

"Judith," she said. Her voice had a reedy, musical lilt. Her hand was cold. He wanted to warm it between the two of his.

"Uh, Howard. Howard Scripps. I didn't think anyone was going to come." As he spoke the words, he realized they were true; the sight of her now was making him dizzy with relief.

Her eyes showed sympathy; their intense blueness was like a little slap. Moonstone-blue, they shone their color as if lit from within. He was, he realized, still holding her hand.

She was smiling. "Are you ready to begin?"

He blinked, not sure he understood. "You? The player? We're challenging you?"

Judith laughed, nodded, and moved towards the board, which he'd laid out the night before.

"Wait," Scripps said. She smiled, puzzled now. "Wait," he said again. "Tell me first, what's it like living here?"

In her blue eyes the light guttered, died. "It's . . . a pleasant life."

"What do you do all day?"

Her smile faltered. "I . . . pass the time." Something closed, shutterlike, back in those blue eyes, and suddenly Scripps did not think she was nearly so pretty.

"And all the others?" He felt cold. "They . . . pass the time also?" *She didn't want to tell him. Why?*

"A pleasant life," she repeated. "Food, warmth. No one hurts me." She looked at the floor. "It was worse, outside."

"What did you do outside?"

"Played Game, of course," she responded, more confident now. "And . . . I was a teacher. A nursery-school teacher." She whispered it, wonderingly.

"A *nursery*-school teacher—" he stopped. Peach-soft skin, blond hair, smooth hands. When the last schools closed, she could not even have been born.

"Judith. *When* did you come Inside?"

She smiled again, an embarrassed smile, like a small child tricked into giving away a secret. "1989."

Exactly one hundred years ago.

She waved at the board. "So. Are you ready to begin?"

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"No. No, I'm not." He was struck by another thought. "How long has it been since the last challenger? Since the last human came in?"

"A long time. Years, I think. But—"

Scripps nodded. "Go away," he said. "Tell them they've got it wrong. I won't play you, and the boy—" Scripps glanced at Joey and a spasm of intense, protective love gripped him. "The boy doesn't play at all. He doesn't know how."

Joey's mouth opened; Scripps shot a look at him; it said, *keep quiet.* Joey did.

"What will you do?" Judith faltered. There had been no instructions for this, clearly.

"Tell them the challenge is for them. I challenge a Bothryan player, here, today."

"Don't do it." Judith glanced fearfully at the walls. *The walls have ears.* "Their minds are—strong. If you lose, you will not know it, ever."

"And if I win?"

She looked straight at him. "You would go free. But no one ever has."

He stared. "I don't believe you."

"All right. Follow me. It doesn't matter, it's all decided already. I only tried to save you pain, as much as I could." She moved to the wall, disappeared through it without glancing back.

"Stay here," he told Joey quickly, and, he hoped, unnecessarily. He slid through the wall as if in Judith's wake.

Dimly he glimpsed her ahead, moving swiftly away in the gloom, and he hurried to catch up. The floor felt . . . squishy, less solid somehow, and he kept his hands pressed tight to his sides, more aware of the walls than before. A faint whispering sound reached him, but there was no time to listen. She waited an instant for him, turning, then stiffened slightly and vanished again. There was nothing to do but go after her, although he cringed at the thought, for the walls had a clammy feel now, clinging more to his face and hands. There was an instant of total disgust as the wall closed around him, and then he was through. What he saw made him think he might weep, or go mad, or both.

In a large room, dimly lit, a low murmuring rolled wave on wretched wave over the forms in the low beds. Some plucked at the bedclothes; some, motionless, stared with blank eyes. People, hundreds of people. A stench hung in the air, fecal, gaggingly strong. Attendants, human as their wards but more alert, moved slowly

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among the beds. Their shoulders sagged under the white gowns they wore, and their faces seemed carved into masks of sadness.

Scripps stared in cold horror.

"We try," Judith said. "But there are so many. We need you, you see. *They* need you."

He whirled on her. "What is this place? *Who are they?*" Knowing, dear God, knowing . . .

"These are the Players," she said calmly. "And this is the Players' Hall."

He wanted to scream. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to run.

"These are . . . Game-masters? *Winners?*"

"No. There are no winners. I told you, their minds are strong. But we need caretakers, so I was sent, *allowed*, rather, to challenge you at the Game. You must be . . . unhurt."

"But you . . . and all these other attendants. You won. There's a chance. . . ."

"No. I lost too." A gleam of pride sparked in her blue eyes. "Just not quite so badly."

That, Scripps thought, depended on how you looked at it. Now he saw that beside each bed, a game-board lay. "Surely they don't play, like this?"

"Watch." Judith made her way among the beds until she came to a low table; on it, another board lay. She placed both hands upon it; a shimmering sound sprang up. As if on signal, the murmuring ceased. The attendants backed off, their arms folded, and every Player reached out for a board. Then a chord like the blast of a gigantic pipe-organ split the air, seeming to penetrate Scripps's, bones. At another signal from Judith, the Players fell back, inert.

Ears ringing dizzyingly, Scripps staggered. "Why?" He was shouting, unable to hear himself through the roaring that still filled his head.

Judith gave him a look full of pity—and something that might have been amusement, a century ago. She had been here that long, he realized. Deafened, he read her lips and felt despair fill him as she mouthed the words.

"*They* do not explain."

Back in the cubicle, he faced her. "They don't watch you," he said. That was why she could take him on tour.

"What should they be afraid of, that we will escape?"

"But you *could* escape." He said the words certainly, watching her face.

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Her eyes flickered away. "I don't know."

"You do know. You could walk through that wall and get out—and take us with you."

"To *what?*" she demanded. "To starve, to freeze? They were dying out there when I came Inside. What's it like now? Why did *you* come?"

"Never mind. We're going back, and you're helping us. You're coming, too."

"It won't do any good. They'll be outside too, soon. They're just waiting."

"For what?"

Judith stared at the floor. "I don't know. Something's changing. The Game—when we play, we can hear them. They're frightened, and soon they'll be everywhere. That's what comes through—fear, and some kind of horrible joy. An explosion of some kind, a spreading. They expect it and want it, but they're afraid, too. That's why they've got us. We can protect them, somehow."

"With the Game?"

Judith nodded. "I don't understand, but I know running won't help. There'll be no place to run to, soon."

Joey sat on the floor, eyes wide, listening. Watching him, Scripps felt a curious calm. He'd been right the first time. To save Joey, himself, he knew just what he had to do. Fear would come later. He hoped it would not come too soon. He turned back to her.

"When you came in, you played one of them, and you're not . . . damaged."

"That doesn't mean *you* can . . ."

Scripps waved impatiently. "That doesn't matter." He felt mild surprise, knowing that it was true. "But—*he* does." Now he mouthed the words so they would not hear. "If I'm . . . gone . . . can you get him out?"

Judith looked doubtful.

"*Please.*" In that one word he put all of his love, all his caring, his stupid hopes. Yes, the world was a madhouse, and dying, but maybe, just *maybe* the boy could make good where they'd failed. "Please. Give Joey his chance."

Something moved in her eyes, then, amazement. And envy, perhaps, for his feelings. Her face spoke a loneliness he could not even imagine. She nodded. Her lips moved then, forming the words. *Yes. Yes, I think I can.*

When she was gone, he addressed the wall. "I've changed my mind," he said. "I withdraw. We want to go back outside."

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"Incorrect," said the wall coldly. He'd known that it would. "Your challenge has been recorded. Prepare to play."

So that was that. *If you lose*, she had said, *you won't know it. Or anything, ever.*

But if he won, he would know everything. Playing them, he would learn. He remembered the feeling of Joey's mind melding with his as they played on the train, and he wondered how it would feel to merge that way with something alien, *other*. He had heard them described, seen antique photographs. Now he would see an alien face. If it *had* a face. . . .

Stop that, he ordered himself. There was no other way. He could not just sit back and let them make the moves. If the woman were right, simply running would do no good. Scripps thought she was. He felt something himself, in the tunnel, especially. Something . . . afoot.

If it *had* feet . . .

Shut up. Wait. And don't spook yourself in the meantime.

He tried to obey himself, sat down and hugged Joey, tried not to think of how bad it might be.

"Please follow." The guide-light hovered three feet off the floor, near the wall.

"The boy too?" Scripps asked.

"Please follow."

Suddenly, Scripps was not sure that he wanted to leave this small white prison. The guide-light, however, was now sliding into the wall. "Come on," he told Joey. "If it doesn't work, sit tight and I'll come back for you." *Or she will*, he thought, but that did not bear thinking of, so he stopped.

The wall swallowed both of them into the same dark, damp passage he'd followed before. A rank insect-smell that had been faint then stung his nose now, making his eyes water. The guide-light bobbed speedily into the distance, guiding but not illuminating; Scripps brushed the wall. Clammy frond-things clung stickily. Jerking away, he hugged his arms to his sides. Behind him, Joey's breath came quick and harsh. The light veered, dipped once, and disappeared.

They stood in the darkness. *Through the wall, oh Jesus, I can't put my face into that—*

The tunnel was different, now, no longer empty but full of a waiting silence. He felt—watched. Somewhere nearby, a whirring sound started, dry papery whicker of wings rubbed together. *Or legs,*

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Scripps thought. *Millions of little legs. Or . . . jaws.* The sound seemed to come from inside the walls, as if something, some *things*—were burrowing out.

"Please follow." Out of the darkness, the guide-light's voice came.

Something touched Scripps's hand; he jerked it away with a smothered shriek. But it was Joey, trembling, reaching out in speechless fear. Scripps bent and pulled him close, and for a moment clung to the wonderfully normal feel of Joey's cotton jacket, Joey's head pressed tight against his chest.

"Please follow. Were it within my authorized function, I would advise you to do so immediately."

Crouched there, Scripps shuddered. The darkness was thick with the rasping sound, seeming to press in from all sides, and the vermin-smell strengthened, a sharp reek now.

Something twined up his leg, nipped his calf, fastened itself in the soft skin behind his knee.

Scripps moaned in horror. He kicked it off, scrambled away, and plunged into the wall, clutching Joey.

The wall *moved* around him. Soft things writhed against his face, probing, invading. He flailed out in nightmare revulsion, resisting the drag of their bodies. One poked up his nose. Then a needle of flame pierced his ear. With his jaws clamped shut, Scripps screamed.

And then they were through.

They emerged, panting, onto a stage in a vast, high-domed hall full of Bothryan spectators. Banks of white lights ringed the stage. Squinting, Scripps made out their shapes: like big toads. They had no necks, just head-humps. Their mouths were thin rubbery slits. As the lights dimmed, he saw their eyes. Each had a pair, placed approximately in the forehead, except they did not really have foreheads. All the eyes were turned on him, and all glowed sulfurous yellow.

Joey was shaking, his lips clamped tight, eyes glazed with shock. But when the guide-light said "Please follow," Joey marched stoically after it, tossing one mute look of fear back at Scripps.

Then from the side of the stage, it appeared. It moved rapidly, smoothly across the floor, with the continuous gliding motion of a snail. Two grey pipestem arms dangled as if unhinged from its sides. It stopped center-stage. "Be-ghinn," it wheezed.

A table-like cylinder rose from the floor; on it glimmered a gameboard. The Bothryan stretched its hands over the board, and the light from below threw its twelve fingers into relief. They were long, slender, round-tipped and without nails. One on each hand jutted

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back towards the wrist. On the board, they made perfect sense, widening the hand's range by eight or ten crystals.

The crystals gleamed, waiting, the octagon board ringing softly. Don't think, *play*, Scripps instructed himself, feeling solid with terror. The Bothryan's yellow eyes stared him down coldly.

Then he could not delay any more; he dropped his hands to the board. A faint ping! chimed up and the game was begun.

In an instant, a tide of sound swept over him, filling his skull. He could not even make out whether it was music. His last coherent thought echoed Judith's words: Their minds are strong. Then his surroundings receded, memory died, reality slid out of sight as Scripps whirled into the mind-set of the Bothryan.

It was like steering a white-water raft with his brain. He fought for control, then realized it was hopeless. He could never lead an opponent this strong. His only chance was to relax, play along, and pick up as much information as he could.

Enormous bells rang in his skull. He had a confused image of his own hands, seen through strange eyes. Tingling warmth rose, tide-like, into his arms and chest. The Bothryan's fingers danced nimbly among the bright crystals. The bells faded, thinned to a high singing-note, under which strange chords sprouted. Then a thin dry chatter set up, and Scripps knew that somewhere, that sound was the wind. Home. No, not home. Somewhere. Not here.

The cataract of sensation calmed enough for Scripps to reach out, cautiously, towards the being whose mind confronted his own. Gently, he questioned it, feeling his own mind get ready to snap shut again like a clam.

A cold purpose, remorseless as an iron spike, met his probing. A cold hunger, leashed only for the sake of later feeding, lapped at him. The song crooned, coaxing: it was a fine and wonderful thing to be of this race, to come into this race, to feed this race. Scripps felt himself frozen in the grip of the Bothryan mind, receiving images helplessly, defenseless as if he were already in the creature's jaws.

To be a Player, to stretch the shining threads from mind to mind, to encase the unresisting in a brittle cocoon of song—it was a fine and wonderful thing. So much space to fill with the swarms of one's children. In his mind's eye Scripps saw them, a river of dark scraping chitinous bodies pouring out of the tunnels. Ravenous, searching, they tumbled over one another, advancing with the force of their terrible hunger after the long incubation.

With sudden hideous clarity, Scripps saw the larvae scrabble towards the parent-forms, then halt in frustrated puzzlement. He felt

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vibrations of Game in himself, felt it turn them away: no food here. And at last he understood Game, its deepest and simplest purpose. Game protected the Bothryans from being devoured by their young.

Its near-total absence from Earth insured that the young would have other food.

He played on, mechanically. The Bothryan was strong, but it allowed him to follow easily. Only if he tried to turn the game, to set his own theme, could he possibly lose. He sensed the Bothryan's parent-fear; it was not strong. There was still time.

He sensed also how much he himself was under suspicion. Game-knowledge flowed both ways. They trusted her, but he was a wild card. Undamaged, he would be watched. Knowing what he must do, and dreading it, he threw himself into the game as if into flames.

He played Earth. A winter sunset, orange and purple and blue spreading over a frozen lake, struck the alien game-matrix and dissolved with an acid hiss. The acid sizzled and burned in Scripps's brain. A howl ripped from his throat.

Reeling, he forced a vision of home: a glowing trash-fire. A drunken, yodeling Bozzie. Around the fire a rag-tag band of scavengers shared their little food and drank the horrible stuff Bozzie strained from abandoned cars. They were singing.

Pain torched his neurons, consuming nostalgia, leaving the vision a heap of grey ash.

The board shrieked as the Bothryan parried his puny thoughts. It flared sulfur-yellow and bile-green, boiled murky no-colors. His brain felt shot with maggots of fire, and he bit his cheeks not to scream. Turning, the room seemed to tumble around him. *Their minds are strong.* Vision died, and the board's high, dismal keening dissolved to white hiss.

Once more. Just once more, and release would come. With a last effort Scripps pulled one final image from somewhere in what still remained of himself. Racked with agony, he held it, simple and true, in the crumbling game-matrix. Desperate, he held to that one feeling:

The child, not feared, but loved. The matrix quivered, humming with unfamiliar resonances; the Bothryan mind-presence reeled back, confused. *The child.* Scripps pressed forward, ferocious joy at the heart of his pain. *The child, fed not with his flesh, but with his love. Love, damn you.* The Bothryan struggled to keep control in an onslaught of image so strong and so alien to it. Its puzzlement and the beginnings of its fear jangled dissonantly in the matrix-song. Scripps grinned, feeling his face twist in triumph even as his brain

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seemed to fry in its own fat. A white-hot emulsion of sound and light erupted from the crystals. Through it he held to one feeling, human, familiar and dear.

He held to the feel of a child's hand, trustingly clasped in his own. *Scripps.* Joey's laughter came trilling in memory. *Scripps, play.*

His mind blazed up in pain like a torch of dry grass.

"Please follow." The guide-light sailed swiftly away down the tunnel. Dazed and clumsy, Scripps let the boy and the woman half-lead and half-carry him. All around, the chitter of small hungry creatures rose to a frenzied pitch; Scripps cringed, frozen with fear and revulsion.

"Come on, Scripps." It was the boy. "You won. They're letting us go. Hurry."

Won? Won what? Their hands pressed him forward. Confusion like nausea roiled in him. He said the only thing he could think of. "Why?"

The woman answered, her voice bleak. "They don't think we can make it through the wall."

Too late, he saw what they forced him towards: a solid, squirming mass of mouths, snapping and slavering—

"No!" He kicked out, but he was too weak; he stumbled and fell into the wall of needle-toothed jaws. He screamed as they battened onto his flesh—

"Scripps! Hey, Scripps, wake up. You're dreaming. Come on, we gotta go, wake up and eat this."

He struggled gratefully into consciousness. It was cold. They had followed the wide, white footpath of an abandoned turnpike, east out of the city, and slept in a thicket. The sky was blue, tinged with pink and gold. He looked down at the battered tin dish the boy offered. Wisps of steam rose from a mound of cooked grain. In his other hand, the boy held a smoking mug; the bitter aroma of acorn coffee tantalized Scripps's nose. He frowned. "Where?"

The boy pointed at a ruined gasoline station, its pumps gone, shattered window-holes plugged with rags. "People live there. I played."

Scripps didn't know what that meant, but he ate the cereal anyway. When he had finished, the boy placed the cup in his hands. "Drink," the boy said, and watched as Scripps obeyed. "Maybe we'll get home tonight."

"Home," Scripps repeated. The food warmed him. He smiled at the boy. A short distance away, a strange woman sat watching them.

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Her light yellow hair, long and straight, plucked a chord in his memory.

"Ju-Judith?"

She nodded, approving. "You're doing just fine. It will all come back, first in dreams, like it did to me. You won, Scripps. You beat them."

Scripps didn't know what that meant, either, but it seemed to be good. He had no idea how long they had been walking, or where, but the boy seemed to know. He found food, and places for them to sleep. He urged Scripps along when Scripps tired, and made their meager camp when darkness came. Scripps felt obscurely grateful to him.

"Stay here," the boy said. His name was—

"Joey!"

The boy grinned. Then he turned and jogged away through the frosty weeds, carrying the mugs and bowls. Scripps watched until a hawk swooped overhead, dipping and wheeling in long, slow circles, around and around until Scripps felt dizzy, and sat down. Uneasily, he fingered the scratches that covered his hands. *The dream*—or had it been real? He shivered.

"Come on," said the boy when he returned, and Scripps obediently hoisted his pack and followed. There was something, a wrong thing. The morning was still, except for birds chittering, high in the trees.

"Hurry." His chest was pounding suddenly. He stood still, willing himself to remember, but it would not come. He gave up and hurried to catch up with Judith and Joey.

Later, they trudged three abreast. "You know what?" said Joey. "Them people back there, they had a kid, and you know what he had? A game-board, a real old one. He didn't even know how to play."

"Play?" Scripps's memory pinged.

"He does now," Joey said. "Likes it, too. I think I'm gonna show everyone."

Scripps stopped. The feeling of urgency in his chest seemed to crack, spilling memories. "You've got to. Teach them—it's the only way. . . ." He trailed off, fists clenched, helpless. The game that was not a game— "I don't *know* why," he burst out, near tears. "But when they come, we'll have to know, to fight—" He stopped again, furious, fighting the blank spots—who were *they?*—but calming somewhat at the look on Joey's face.

"Okay," Joey said. "I believe you. Judith says you'll remember more, and I'll teach you Game again, on the way home."

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"We'll all teach," Judith said. "You learned something about them. You'll remember. We'll teach, and we'll tell everyone else to teach . . . you beat them, Scripps. You're the only one."

Her face expressed perfect confidence; he wondered how he had earned it. Whatever the battle had been, he knew it was only the first one and not the last. "I don't remember," he said, "but I will."

Something was coming back with the trickle of memories, something he'd lost not in recent days, but long ago. Feelings beat painfully in his chest with his living blood. There was a fight ahead, he knew, though he didn't know yet what it was. He looked at the woman and boy beside him, glad not to face the future alone. The sky overhead was blue. The sun was midway into it, shedding pale yellow light. The wide path curved ahead, disappearing into the trees.

"We'll try," he said. "We can try. Come on, let's go home."

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

There are a number of cons coming up quickly in the Midwest and South. Make your plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax, VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number and I'll call back at my expense. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning, give your name and reason for calling right away. Find me behind the Filthy Pierre badge at cons.

CapriCon. For info, write: **Bestler, 101 W. Harrison, Oak Park IL 60304. Or phone: (312) 465-6899** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Chicago IL (if city omitted, same as in address) on: 26-28 Feb., 1982. Guests will include: Gene Wolfe, Mike Stein. Events will include: "This Is Your Life: Godzilla" skit, Moebius Theatre play, running Squamish game, trivia bowl.

YuCon, c/o SFera, Ivanicgradska, 41a, 41000, Zagreb, Yugoslavia. 26-28 Feb. The national convention.

EatonCon, Slusser, U. Library, Box 5900, U of C, Riverside CA 92517. *27-28 Feb. Academic gathering.*

WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 231-2916 (days), 233-0326 (eves). 5-7 Mar. Suzette Haden (Communipath) Elgin, Terry ("Universe") Carr. Masquerade. A leading feminist oriented convention.

UpperSouthClave, Box U122, Coll. Hts. Sta., Bowling Green KY #42101. Park City KY, 5-7 Mar. Irvin Koch. A Southern-fried relaxacon. Indoor heated swimming pool, private sauna, 24-hour party room.

TropiCon, Box 2811, Boca Raton FL 33432. *12-14 Mar. Samuel R. ("Dhalgren") Delany, artist Vincent* DiFate, Gene Wolfe, James Gunn, Brian Aldiss, John Morressy. Coordinated with academic SwannCon.

KingKon, Box 1284, Colorado Springs CO 80901. (303) 633-8845. 12-14 Mar. Libertarian L. Neil Smith, artist Gail Barton, Gordon Garb, Connie Willis. Masquerade, T-shirt contest (judged wet or dry?).

CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. 12-14 Mar. Richard and Wendy ("Elfquest") Pini, Joe ("Forever War") Haldeman, Jo (Diadem) Clayton, Geo. Alec ("Felicia") Effinger. 24-hour party room, banquet.

NorWesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. 19-21 Mar. Thomas M. ("Camp Concentration") Disch, artist Michael Whelan, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw, Richard A. Lupoff. Masquerade, writers' workshop, banquet.

LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150. Hasbrouck Heights NJ (near New York City), 19-21 Mar. Fred ("Berserker") Saberhagen, artist John Schoenherr, Steve Stiles. 25th birthday of this old NY con.

FoolCon, c/o Bacon, JCCC, 12345 College @ Quivira, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 888-8500, x 408/9. *2-4 Apr. Robert ("Psycho") Bloch, James ("Genesis Machine") Hogan, artists A. Austin & T. Kirk.*

ChannelCon, 4 Fletcher Rd., Chiswick, London W4 5AY, UK. Brighton, England, UK, 9-12 Apr. John Sladek, Angela Carter. EasterCon, the British national con. At the Metropole (site of SeaCon).

BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. 9-11 Apr. Moving to big intown hotel. Used to sell out fast.

AprilCon, B-C SF Soc., 317 Ferris Booth Hall, Columb. U., New York NY 10027. *17 Apr. Thomas Disch.*

WesterCon, Box 11644, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 249-2616. Gordon R. ("Dorsai") Dickson, David ("Man Who Folded Himself") Gerrold, Fran Skene. The big Western regional con at the 1978 WorldCon site.

ChiCon IV, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690. 2-6 Sep., 1982. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 World SF Con. Go to smaller cons to prepare yourself for WorldCons.

ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203. *1-5 Sep, 1983. John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of* Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Join WorldCons early as possible to miss rate hikes.

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Remember back in fifth grade, when you'd take a history test and your teacher would say, "Spelling counts!" And you'd all groan and complain about how unfair that was because after all, this was a history test and not a spelling test, and besides, if you knew the stuff, what difference did it make if it was spelled right? And then remember when you were in high school or college composition courses, and the teacher would hand your paper back to you with a note saying that while the content was good, the spelling, typing, and punctuation were so atrocious as to bring the grade down to a C–? And then you'd fume, and say, "But I'm creative! I'm not a moron, I know how to spell all these words, I just don't have time to go back and correct them all. Besides, the idea is so good, I could sell this to a magazine and the editor would fix all my mistakes." Remember that? I do. I was one of those students. However, a stint behind the editor's desk has completely cured me of that affliction. I now believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that any competent writer should know the tools of his trade, and that means spelling, punctuating, and typing. If I had a quarter for every time I've had to write "Watch your spelling!" on a rejection slip, I could retire to at least Bermuda, if not Hawaii. And frankly, I'm tired of it. This is English we're writing in; it has a set of rules and regulations designed to make it easily comprehensible to other speakers and readers of English. If you choose to ignore those rules, you stand a chance of being incomprehensible, no matter how terrific your idea is. Thus, I am taking up this valuable space in your magazine to issue a fiat: SPELLING COUNTS! ! ! To be frank, no matter how great your idea may be, when we look at a manuscript and see hundreds of silly misspellings (such as: **intirely, rediculous,** *or* **it's** *for* **its**) *we take it a* lot *less seriously: If you can't spell, have a friend look over your story; but if you care about it, make sure it's submitted right! End of lecture. Have a nice Easter.*

—Shawna McCarthy

Dear George, Dr. A, et al.,

Do you pass messages on to authors? If so, please pass this one on to Jerry Pournelle. Tell him I hate him, I hate him with a passion.

Because of him pencils have become an endangered species around my house. I slaughter them by the thousands, leaving their mangled little bodies to moulder in the corners. All because they can't rearrange words as easily as Pournelle's computer. My poor little Royal

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portable cringes and whimpers any time I come near it. It can't make error-free copies quickly and easily. It doesn't rearrange paragraphs at the push of a button.

I'm unhappy and frustrated by the limitations of my regular tools. Always before I had been content(?) to sit calmly rewriting my innumerable drafts in longhand with a pencil. Then sit quietly down and blunder through a rough typescript to finally, laboriously crank out a finished manuscript without too many liquid paper patches.

Now, thanks to you, Pournelle, and your glowing account of your computer and the ease with which it does all these things, I hate my pencil. And even the thought of sitting down to my loyal little Royal sends me screaming into the night.

And why, I ask you? WHY? Because you had to show me how it could be better. In my ignorance was bliss. But no more. I'm haunted now, with the desire, nay the need, the very demanding drive to have my very own little genius working for me. Whatever I have to do, beg, borrow, STEAL, I've got to have one.

See what you've done to me, Jerry!

In spite of this, George, I'm enclosing an SASE for your editorial requirements. Hopefully I can overcome this dreadful handicap long enough to prepare something for submission to *IA'sfm*.

Just a final word of commendation. I've read them all over the past twenty-odd years and *IA'sfm* is without a doubt the best. I read it voraciously from cover to cover the same day I get it. I even read the letters, which is something I've never done before.

Keep up the good work and thanks for the wonderful magazine.

Sincerely,

Art Crafts
Box 633
Calimesa CA 92320

But then, technology need not represent total replacement. I have a word processor, but still find it convenient to use the typewriter for certain purposes. (I'm using it right now.) I even find it convenient to use ball-point pens for many writing chores.

—Isaac Asimov

My Dear People,

I have just finished reading the September 28 issue of your fine magazine, including the editorial and letters sections; and unlike most seem to, I do not like your new cover design AT ALL. I still

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love the inside though.

I feel that the old covers' basic design, perhaps with "Isaac" and "Science Fiction Magazine" shrunk and the entire title pushed upward for room, was more pleasing to the eye. The full-page picture and variety of title colors combined with the smooth curving letters was much less harsh and was more imaginative than the sharp, blahh block letters on bright white you now have.

The picture is no less cluttered than the old cover would have been with similar lettering for date, authors' names, and the UPC symbol (maybe that could go on the back). Also, such a sudden change is a bit of a shock to those of us (I hope I'm not alone) who so liked the other cover for its smooth, easy design.

Better luck next try.

Joe Eber
Brooklyn CT

It stands to reason that even the shrewdest people can't always guarantee that changes will work out—but we're bound to try. If we become convinced that a change doesn't work out, we'll try another, never fear.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George Scithers:

I must object strongly to the new design of the Table of Contents. First of all, those miniature illustrations do nothing to improve the looks of the page; if anything they detract from it by forcing you to use smaller print. I much preferred the larger print; it was so much easier to read. Secondly, I can see no logical reason for putting the page numbers on the left-hand side of the page. Since most people reading English do so from left to right, and since the title is the first thing they are interested in, shouldn't the title come first? I do hope you will change to something closer to what you had in the first place.

Michael W. Koehler
Staten Island NY

And yet, on the other hand, when we number paragraphs, or points we are making, or items of any kind, we always put the numbers at the beginning, and to the left. It is all a matter of custom, and what we are aiming at is an attractive overall page.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am writing to you, first of all to request your manuscript requirements. As a writer, it was inevitable that after reading a few months' worth of your magazine I would be overwhelmed by the urge to try my own hand at science fiction.

Secondly, I *love* your magazine and the new covers! I am forced, though, to agree with Mr. Ralph D. Bell that *IA'sfm* is getting too over-run by fairy tales and fantasies instead of real science fiction (for example, James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Lirios" in the September 28 issue is a common *ghost story,* and not in the literary class expected of *IA'sfm*). I get the feeling that the editors simply accept any story sent in by one of your "regulars" without reviewing it first to see if it belongs in the magazine.

On the other hand, I greatly enjoyed the recent stories "Exposures," "Mallworld Graffiti," "You Can't Go Back," "Limits," and most of Sharon Webb's and J.O. Jeppson's works. Keep up the good work!

With admiration,

Holly Wenninger
Kent OH

If you get that feeling, you're wrong. Despite the fact that I have written and sold dozens of "Black Widower" stories, I get one rejected every once in a while. An editor who accepts stories just because one of the old favorites wrote it, without bothering to read it with full critical faculties engaged, isn't going to stay editor long.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors,

Having kept up—more or less—with this magazine since the beginning, I'm finally moved to write. The latest issue (September 28, 1981) pleases me more than any other I can recall. First, because it contained a story by R. A. Lafferty. Not full-tilt, vintage Lafferty, but he loafs better than most people work. I'd certainly like to see more of his stories in *Asimov's.*

Second, "Lirios, A Tale of the Quintana Roo" by James Tiptree, Jr., is the best thing you've printed. (Yes, I know how much territory that covers.) Simply the best. I would point out, however, that it's more fantasy than science fiction; I'd also like to point out that I couldn't care less. Good is good, whatever category you put it in. (Odd that in the same issue you printed the letter of someone who

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was giving you up because you printed "fairy tales and fantasies" instead of sf. Wasn't it Poul Anderson who said that most people say they like sf then go out and read fantasy? Or words to that effect?)

My curiosity is killing me. "Quintana Roo" has a hauntingly familiar ring to it. On the other foot, I wouldn't be surprised if Tiptree hadn't made it up out of hauntingly familiar whole cloth. If you can, please tell me which. Is it an old term, or a beautiful fake? (The nearest I can decipher it using various dictionaries is "Fifth Wheel.")

Last, and least, I like your new cover much more than I did the old.

Keep the Lafferty and Tiptree coming. Keep up the good work. And I don't care what you call it!

Sincerely,

Ron Nance
Ardmore OK

According to Tiptree, it's a real place.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear People;

I've tried, I've really tried. For untold months now I've forced myself to look at your new cover style and examine it with an unbiased eye. And every time a new issue comes out I say to myself, "Give it one more chance; you'll get used to it." I've been giving it one more chance now for several months and it still isn't getting any better. I still don't like it.

But I couldn't just write a nasty hate letter, saying what rubbish the new style is, and why don't they make covers the way they used to, and by the way *Analog* is pretty crummy too. You'd just dismiss the letter out of hand and tell me to give it another chance, or two, or ten, or don't call us we'll call you. No, I had to wait until I could figure out just exactly why it is that I don't like your new format. And that wasn't easy. For the first couple of months the covers just kind of sat there like a lump in my brain, festering away. Whenever I tried to explain it, even to myself, I usually ended up saying something like, "Well, they're just . . . just . . . awful."

But finally, after several months of being gently nudged into nausea each time I picked up an issue, I finally crystallized my dislike into two distinct areas: the white border and Dr. Asimov's picture.

First, the white border. With the old style, the cover art went all the way to the edge of the cover. It covered every possible millimeter.

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And if the picture was well done and grand in scope, you could sit back and stare at it and imagine that it went beyond the edge of the page. Far beyond. So far in fact that it was as if an entire universe had suddenly opened up to you. But the new style with its white border ended all that. Not even a strong imagination can force a picture beyond that stark, forboding whiteness. The new style puts a border around imagination, clutching it with unbendable white fingers, forcing it into its own prescribed niche.

Now, to Dr. Asimov's picture. In the old style cover, Dr. Asimov's picture was an element of this universe, in sharp contrast to the universe depicted in the cover art. But rather than being distracting or out of place, his picture seemed to make the alternate universe of the cover seem more real. It was as if Dr. Asimov was staring through the portal of his own name to oversee the events of that new universe, just as Dr. Asimov, in reality, oversees the stories presented in his magazine. It fit, it felt good, it seemed real.

But now, alas, you've ended all that. Your magazine covers look like billboards, like ads for Diet Pepsi. They're pretty to look at, but no one can fool themselves into thinking they're real. Please bring the old covers back. Or at least compromise by taking away the white borders.

All of this, of course, is only a comment on the outside of your magazine. The inside is still of the same quality, excellent stories by established pros and interesting stories by talented or soon-to-be-talented newcomers. The issue I read most recently (August 31, 1981) contained a particularly good story by Mr. Sucharitkul, "Mall-world Graffiti." It held my interest from beginning to end. And the poem and the letter (especially the letter) by Mr. MacIntyre were a joy. Only "Written on the Water," by G. C. Edmondson, which I found impossible to follow, and the incorrect page number in the ToC for "Scanners Writhe in Pain" were minuses for this issue.

But if you think you'll attract more newsstand readers with the new cover format, I think you're wrong. Take a look at some of the old ones and then take a look at some of the new ones. Do you really think the new style is better?

Steven Armbrust
Beaverton OR

I must admit I didn't think of my picture as functioning in that matter. I thought it was just a matter of my incredible good looks fascinating everyone.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers,

Your magazine is very enjoyable, especially your new, more sophisticated cover format. You have such a good mixture of stories, puzzles, poetry, and editorials. I especially like the book reviews since it is increasingly difficult to choose among the many excellent offerings on the newsstand today. Mr. Searles seems to enjoy the same type of books I do.

Your magazine is appearing on newsstands here in Florida with greater frequency, including book stores in the malls. I personally started subscribing through one of those "sweepstakes mailings." I didn't win any money in the sweepstakes, but I feel the acquisition of your magazine made up for at least a $1,000 prize!

I would love to submit to your magazine. Enclosed is a stamped self-addressed envelope. Please send me your format information. Keep up the good work, especially editorials like the one on "Drawing the Line."

Sincerely,

David T. Cox
219 Hickory St., NW
W. Melbourne FL 32901

About the best news we can get (next to approval of the magazine itself) is that we are appearing on newsstands in reliable fashion. We can't sell unless we are there, and it frustrates us that sometimes we are not.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Being the kind of gourmet reader who likes her stories in book form, until my sister sent me *IA'sfm* last Christmas I had never bothered with the brief forms available in magazines. All that has changed now. Each new issue of your magazine finds me delighted with the fare you offer. I gobble up your column first, then check for one more clever creature from the improbable bestiary, rush to the back for the letter column, check out which books Searles recommends, and then settle down for a leisurely feast of stories. Although I don't expect to like them all, I certainly enjoy the majority.

I teach creative writing at a community college and find that a majority of my students hope to be science-fiction writers. I tell them that they are lucky because, if and when they become craftsmen, there is a market for them. Taking my own advice, I am writing to

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request your story specifications as I also aspire to be included in the array of talent found in every issue.

I was very interested to see that Sharon Webb gave her address and asked for comments from her readers, and I have taken her on her word. Now I want to know how I can write to other contributors to let them know how much I enjoyed their work. Do we send letters to them care of this column?

Please thank George and Shawna and the rest of the *IA'sfm* staff for the wonderful treat that your magazine provides for me each issue.

Sincerely,

Maureen Townsend

Hurrah for sisters! And remember, in considering short stories, the old saw that good things come in small packages.

—Isaac Asimov

Letters to your favorite authors can be sent care of this letter column. The best way to do this is to seal your letter in an envelope bearing appropriate postage and the author's name; then seal this into a larger envelope and send that one to us. We'll then forward your letter.

—Shawna McCarthy

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:

The CLARION WORKSHOP in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing will be held at Michigan State University from June 27 through August 7, 1982. Writers in residence will be Algis Budrys, Marta Randall, Samuel R. Delany, Orson Scott Card, Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight. Address inquiries to Dr. Leonard Isaacs, Lyman Briggs School, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

NEXT ISSUE

Brian Aldiss, George Alec Effinger, Barry N. Malzberg, Somtow Sucharitkul, John M. Ford and Sydney J. Van Scyoc are just a few of the writers whose work will appear in our April 12, 1982 issue. In addition, we'll have a puzzle from Martin Gardner, an editorial from the Good Doctor, book reviews, and much more. On sale March 16, 1982.

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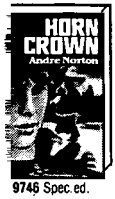

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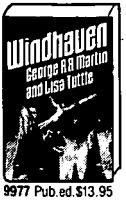

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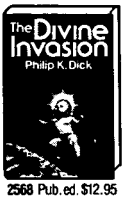

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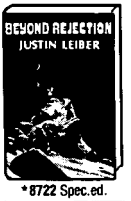

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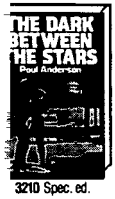

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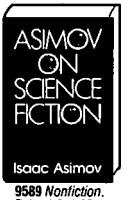

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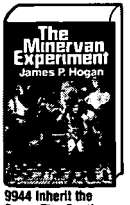

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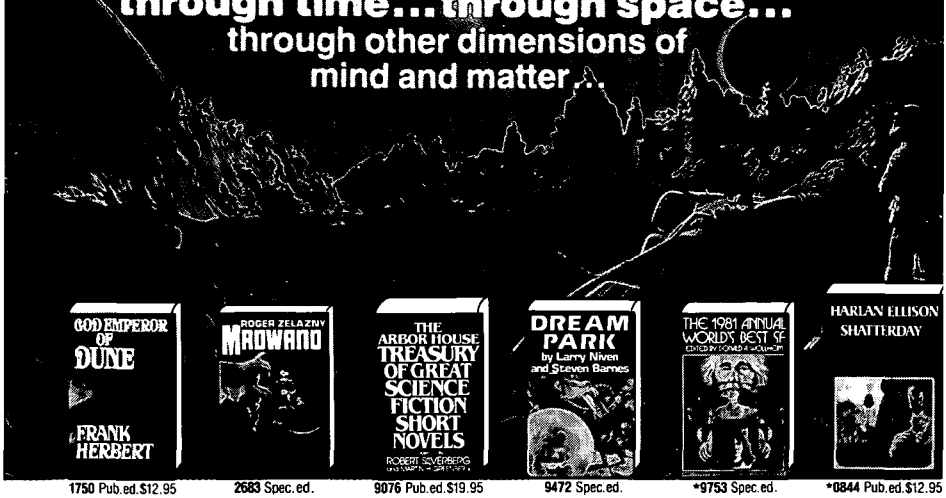

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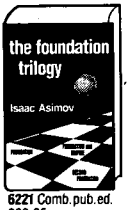

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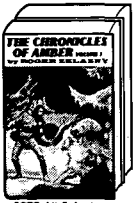

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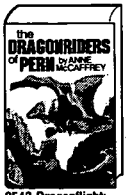

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